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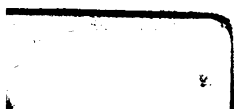
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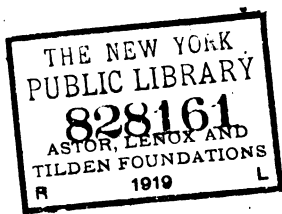


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# CHERRY'S CHILD

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## CHAPTER I

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### OLD FRIENDS MEET AGAIN

WE were at the Hotel St. Antoine, father and I, and he was very ill. I could hardly remember the time when he was really quite well, when he did not rise late in the day and dawdle through the long sunny hours with a cigar and a newspaper, as if the days only came round to be got through with the least possible exertion. My very earliest recollection of him is in connection with a bench in the full blaze of the sunshine, in which most of my early life was passed, for we systematically dodged winter with its frosts and snows, and pitched our tent wherever we could find warmth. And in July we were at Antwerp, lodged in rooms *au premier* at the Hotel St. Antoine.

On the day on which my story begins there was sunshine in plenty outside the hotel, but my father did not get very much of it. The Place Verte was bathed in golden light, and there was a bench within a few yards of the door, a bench with a back to it. I told him these items of information in the most tempting language I could command, but the bench and the sunshine seemed neither of them to have charm to draw him from the velvet-covered couch, upon which he had lain ever since

he came through the folding-doors from his bedroom two hours before.

"I don't feel quite equal to it, to-day, Nell," he said, sleepily. "Just draw up the blinds to the height of the *jalousies*, and I can enjoy the sunshine without moving."

I drew up the blinds, and then I asked if there was anything else I could do for him.

"Yes, child; give me some more brandy and soda. Very little brandy and lots of soda, and put some ice in it. Yes, that will do. And then I wish you would go as far as the post-office, and see if there are any letters; after that you might look round for fruit of some kind."

"Then give me some money," I replied, "for I have not so much as a *petit sou*."

"You'll find some in my dressing-case," he told me; "and, Nell, be sure you take an umbrella, or you'll be burnt as brown as a berry."

"What an immense trouble my complexion is to you, father!" I cried, with a laugh. "I am sure the responsibility of it weighs far more heavily upon your mind than it does upon mine. Now, I don't care a toss about it."

"A toss," repeated my father, with a sigh which ended in a little sharp cough. "Oh, Nell, Nell! If I'd left you at some convent in Paris, instead of dragging you about the face of the earth, as I have done, I might have the pleasure of hearing you speak presentable English by this time."

"It is fortunate that I am too old to go to school now," I answered; "and you know very well that you never could have got on without me. Whatever you did before I was born, I really don't know, Daddy."

"I married your mother, my dear."

"Yes, and then you married my step-mother."

"And then your step-mother," he repeated. "Now, child, go and get your fruit, and I shall try to sleep a little."

I set the iced water within his reach, and went softly out of the room, for he had closed his eyes, and was apparently already asleep.

Our rooms were *en suite*; that is to say, my bedroom opened by folding-doors from one side of the *salon*, and my father's from the other.

My toilette was soon made. As I settled my hat on my head, I told myself, for the hundredth time, that never was any girl so exactly like her father. Well it was for me, for from the crown of his closely-cropped dark head to the soles of his neat feet he was goodly to see; and as I looked in the glass I beheld a youthful feminine reproduction of him. The same dark hair; the same liquid, dusky eyes, dark as night and clear as deep waters; the same straight dark brows and long eye-lashes. The nose straight and clearly cut, and the mouth arched like a Cupid's bow. Even the bronze that used to make his face different to mine had vanished of late; he was as transparently pale as I. I shook my white dress and smoothed the creases out of the sleeves before I drew on my gauntlets, which were also white. Then, with a large white umbrella in my hand, I sallied forth.

Letters there were none; but I had the good fortune to secure an *Illustrated London News* 'ere I went on my way in quest of fruit. It was easily found in Antwerp, and I went back to the hotel laden with rich spoils: huge black Hamburg grapes, and large plums, with their delicate bloom still untouched.

As I entered the hotel, I met a lady, evidently an English woman, who was just going out. I glanced at her, carelessly at first, and then with keener interest, for she was very pretty, with golden hair and blue, blue eyes, and, although I had never been in England since I could remember, I had learned to associate this particular type of beauty as belonging to the women of my own country. She, too, regarded me with a careless, unspeculative glance, betokening no special interest; then, all at once, a gleam of recognition came into her eyes and she stopped short.

"Surely I have seen you before somewhere," she said, in a musical voice; "but I cannot remember where."

My training had been such that I was not in any way troubled with shyness, like so many of the English girls we had met in our wanderings. I shook my head, and answered civilly that I did not remember her.

"But we meet so many people," I added, apologetically.

"My name is Sandys," she said, trying to refresh my memory. "Mrs. Sandys, of Hutton Royal."

"No,"—I shook my head again. "I do not think I have ever met you. My name is Ferrers."

"Ferrers!" she said, sharply. "Not Fane Ferrers's daughter, surely!"

"Yes, I am Fane Ferrers's daughter," I replied, wondering why the fact should have such a startling effect upon her. "Do you know him?"

"I knew him once," she said, softly, and with an odd look in her blue eyes. "I knew him once; more than twenty years ago."

"Twenty years ago!" I echoed in incredulous amazement, for she looked quite young.

"Yes, dear; when I was not much older than you are now."

"I am sixteen, nearly seventeen," I said, simply.

"Ah, I thought so. Well, when I knew Fane Ferrers I was a year older than that: 'sweet seventeen,'" she added, a little bitterly. Then she recovered herself and her conventional tones. "Your mother, is she here?"

"My mother died when I was born," I answered. "Did you know her too?"

"I never saw her," she returned. "But I heard she was pretty and charming. But your father—is he altered at all?"

"I'm afraid so," I said, with a sigh. "He is so ill, you know."

"Ill?" she repeated, sharply. "What is the matter with him?"

"I cannot tell you. He cannot bear the cold; indeed, we keep moving about from place to place in search of warmth. He has a cough,—a little sharp, hacking cough; and every day or two he gets fever."

"What sort of fever?" she asked.

"Oh, I forget," I replied. "You do not have fevers of that kind in England. It is a hot ague—he seems shivering, and all the time he is simply burning."

"And where is he now?"

"I left him asleep in the *salon*," I answered.

"I should like to see him," she said, frankly; "and I think he would not mind seeing me. Are you called after your mother?"

"Yes; my mother's name was Geraldine, and I too am called Geraldine Ferrers," I replied. "But my father has always called me Nell; it is a favourite name of his."

"I should like to go and see him," she said, decidedly.

I led the way to our *salon* and opened the door gently; for I did not intend to awaken him, if he were sleeping, for all the old friends in creation. He was, however, wide awake, watching, with his tired dark eyes, the sunbeams playing outside the window. As I entered, he turned his head towards me.

"What an age you have been, child! I began to think you had eloped, or were trying to bring the whole fruit market for me to choose from; you will have no time to dress for dinner."

"I have brought a lady to see you, father," I answered.

"A lady! It is very kind of her, I am sure."

"An old friend of yours," I added.

"Then draw up the blind and let me look at her," he cried, with a weak laugh, as he tried to rise.

"No, no! Do not rise," cried Mrs. Sandys, advancing into the room. "It is I, Fane; have you forgotten me?"

"Forgotten you!" he echoes. "Indeed I have not."

"I hear you have been ill," she said, taking the seat next to his couch and regarding him earnestly.

"Yes; I am getting on pretty fast now, Nell."

I was still occupied with the blind, but I turned at the sound of my name.

"Did you speak, father?" I asked.

"Not to you, child; why?"

"You said 'Nell.'"

"I was not speaking to you, childie. Go and dress for dinner, and put on that pretty white gown you wore yesterday."

I did his bidding at once, and quite unintentionally I left the door between the rooms slightly open. Presently I heard her say, "Have you forgotten me, Fane?" I did not like to close the door, because that would have told

them that I had heard what she said ; so I went on dressing, trying not to listen.

"It wasn't quite my fault, Fane. I was so young—only seventeen—and I did not know what I threw away," said she. "And I had a bad bringing-up, Fane."

"I believe you had," he agreed. "Any way, it's no use talking about it now. It is all over and done with, and there is no more to be said about it."

"Ah, you soon got over it!" came her pitiful, bitter voice. "I did not; I suppose that is the penalty I have to pay for my transgressions. No wonder you soon forgot me—the girl who had not courage and truth and honour enough to keep true to you."

"I have never forgotten you, Nell," he said, quietly.

"No, but you ceased to love me; you found solace elsewhere; while my married life was one long penance. Every luxury I possessed seemed turned to ashes, because it had been bought at the cost of my love. Every look and word and action of the man I married reminded me of what I had lost."

"I met my wife in Italy," said father, quietly. "I think I was more dismayed than anything when I found that she seemed to care for me beyond all the other men who were always hanging about her. She was very pretty—not altogether unlike you, Nell."

"Ah!"

"Poor little Cherry! Her father was English chaplain at Naples, and there I met her. I hadn't the most remote intention of marrying her, or, indeed, any one else; but one night I told her I was going away in a few days, and should probably go back to England. To my dismay, she burst into tears, and the end of it was that I asked her to marry me."

"But you didn't love her," cried Mrs. Sandys, eagerly; "not as you loved me?"

"Most decidedly not."

I clenched my hand indignantly as my father's placid, weak voice fell upon my ear. I made no attempt then to go on with my toilette—I was too anxious to hear my mother's story. As he continued, my fingers gradually unclenched themselves.

"No, I never loved Cherry as I loved you, Nell. You see, I could have staked my life on her love for me—it does make a difference."

There was no reply, and presently he went on again.

"I have the same delightful feeling of confidence in my little girl; she is very like her mother in character, although she takes after me in person. My poor little Cherry only lived a year after we were married. Just when I was beginning to think I could not live without her, she was taken away, and I was left alone with Nell. Cherry's maid stayed with me until I married again, and then the second Mrs. Ferrers soon sent her packing."

"What made you marry again?" she asked, abruptly.

"Well, don't you see, my old governor had always allowed me five hundred a year; and, after Nell and I had been trailing all over the Continent for seven years, he died, and left me only a couple of hundred a year. I couldn't possibly live upon that, and so I married this woman—partly because she was rich, and partly because, like poor Cherry, she cared for me. She was very different from Cherry, though,—she reminded me more of a volcano than anything else; and yet she could be very attractive sometimes. And what have you been doing all these twenty long years, Nell?"

"Oh, the usual round. The season and the country; the country and the season; with an occasional trip on the Continent, as now."

"And how do you get on with your husband?"

"I am a widow," she answered. "Mr. Sandys died seven years ago."

"You don't say so! And so you are all alone in the world. Poor little Nell!"

There was a slighting pity in his tone which would have cut me to the heart if it had been addressed to me; and I fancy, from Mrs. Sandys's voice, when she spoke again, that she felt its sting intensely.

"I am not quite alone," she said: "I have a son."

"A son!" said my father. "How old?"

"Twenty-one; he is in the army."

"What regiment?"

"The Twenty-fifth Hussars."

"They used to be an uncommonly smart set. And who is he like, Nell,—you or his father?"

"He is like me," replied Mrs. Sandys, coldly, and as if the subject was not a particularly pleasant one. "He is like me in every way, except that he has inherited something of his father's obstinate temper."

"Oh, I knew old Sandys was a regular Bashaw," laughed my father, carelessly. "So you found it out, did you, Nell? Well, it's a good thing the boy is like you in person—for you are wonderfully good-looking, and Sandys certainly was not."

"No, he was not good-looking," she agreed.

"I used to wonder how on earth you brought yourself to do it, Nell—after me, you know!"

"Don't!" she cried, imploringly. "I did not know myself. Oh, Fane, Fane,"—with a passionate, yearning cry,

—"I would give half my life to live the last twenty-two years over again."

"Too late now, dear," he said, kindly; "too late for anything but for you to come and sit beside my couch and talk to me."

"I may do that?"

"Surely. But are you here alone?"

"I was on my way to Wiesbaden, to join Nora. You remember Nora? But now I shall write and say I am here, and shall remain indefinitely."

"I shall be glad of that. I am uneasy about Nell. If anything happened to me, there is no one to whom I could trust her, and she is very young."

"Could you trust her to me—after all that is past?" she asked, eagerly. "Could you trust me to love her, and guard her interests as I would those of my own child? Oh, Fane, darling, I should feel you have forgiven me if you will only say yes!"

"I will say it, gratefully," he answered. "The pain you once gave me is all over now, and only the old love is left. If you will be a mother to my child, my blessing will always follow you—mine and Cherry's."

I turned away to the glass and hurried on my dress. I could hear Mrs. Sandys weeping passionately, and my father had ceased speaking. I was puzzled; I did not see why they should make such a fuss about me. I really did not want a mother; and, if Mrs. Sandys proved to be anything like the second Mrs. Ferrers, I knew that I should be anything but grateful to my father for bringing such a disturbing element into our happy cosmopolitan life.

Then, my toilet being finished, I went into the *salon* to find that my father and Mrs. Sandys had both gone—the room was empty.

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## CHAPTER II

---

### A CHANGE OF AIR

I WAS standing at one of the windows overlooking the Place Verte, watching the gay stress of life below. I liked Antwerp very much, but wished my father would go on to Spa, for Antwerp was terribly hot, and, although he was always cold,—at least he complained continually of the chill,—I believed this intense heat was bad for him.

Presently he came into the room, and laid down again upon the sofa, as if the exertion of changing his light coat for a black one had been almost too much for him. I wished he would do as other English people do, and dine in mufti, but he never would—it was a concession for him to make a black coat serve for evening dress.

“Mrs. Sandys is going to stay here awhile, Nell,” said my father presently, when he had recovered his breath. “I want you to try to like her as much as you can. She’s a very old friend of mine.”

“Were you ever in love with her, father?” I asked.

“Very much so, indeed, child,” he returned, quietly.

“Not more than with my mother!” I cried, indignantly.

“My dear child,” said my father, kindly, “if ever you come to be married, it is very improbable that you will marry the great love of your life. And if you do not, Nell, you will understand that though you may love some one else in a way much more than your husband, still he is your husband. I can’t explain it, but it is so. I suppose

I loved Nell Fairfax more than I ever loved any one else before or since; but neither she nor any other woman could ever be to me what your mother was. Oh, no, no! One's wife is one's wife, and no one else can come up to her."

"And yet Mrs. Sandys does not seem to think much of her husband," I answered, doubtfully. His argument was undeniably good, but what is sauce for the gander does not seem to be sauce for the goose at all.

"If she had married me," returned my father, smiling, "we should have had two hundred a year to live upon, and in six months she would probably have been utterly miserable."

"But she seems to be that already," I put in.

"Nonsense, child! Mrs. Sandys is a woman who was born to be rich, to have her season in town and her frequent trips to the Continent, her country-house, and all the rest of it. As a poor man's wife, she would have had real troubles; as a rich woman, she must needs make them out of nothing. All the same, I must confess it would have been a serious trouble to me to sit for fifteen years opposite to such a face as John Sandys's."

"What was he like?"

"Most like the 'missing link,' of anything human I ever saw," he replied. "It's a most providential thing that the boy takes after his mother. Now, if you had resembled your mother, child, it would have been of no consequence, for she was a most lovely woman."

"I wish I was like her," I said, dreamily.

My father laughed.

"You are very passable, child," he remarked, quizzically. "You do very well as you are."

"Thank you," I answered.

"Looks, so long as they are not repulsive," continued my father, "are not of very great importance. Remember this, child: always be true, always be honest, always keep your honour untarnished. Remember, that however beautiful you may be, if a man who cares for you finds out that you are less faithful and true than he once believed, he will never quite feel the same for you again. Love is like a delicate porcelain vase; it gets cracked. Just a little flaw, that nine persons out of ten would never notice, and yet it can never be quite so valuable again as it once was. And yet," he went on, "there may be some one who cherished the vase long after it had been cracked and marred almost beyond recognition; and that affection is, perhaps, the best of any. Still, I wouldn't run the risk of depending upon it, Nell. At the best 'tis but a pitying love, and is very rarely found, even where it might most reasonably be expected."

"Oh, then that's the sort of love you have for Mrs. Sandys!" I suggested. "Well, Daddy, I certainly shouldn't like that."

"Remember, child," he said, quite solemnly, "that I wish you to be always Mrs. Sandys's good friend; it is my earnest wish, Nell."

Then the bell rang for dinner, and father rose from his couch with a groan of fatigue at being disturbed.

Before we were seated, Mrs. Sandys entered the room; and as she was now without her hat and veil, I was able to see her much more plainly.

She was certainly a very beautiful woman, her hair of the purest golden tint, lustrous and gleaming with a thousand different lights, and waving all over her head. Behind her small, shell-like ears it was gathered into a loose knot, lying carelessly upon the nape of her slender neck.

Her features were aquiline, but not large, and her complexion like the purest snow and carmine. The nearest approach to a fault in her face was in the eyes, for they, unless she smiled or was deeply interested, were very cold. True, they were large and of a deep blue; but in their frosty coldness they made me think of cold steel, even though just then they were filled to overflowing with melting tenderness.

"I have told them to keep me a place next to yours, Fane," she said to my father, who was lying languidly back in his chair, with half-closed eyes.

"Quite right," he murmured.

I was so well used to his sweet acquiescence that I could not understand the flush which swept across her fair face. I knew she must be very much in love with him; and, to tell the truth, I rather wondered that he was so entirely indifferent about it. He seemed too ill to eat anything; going down to dinner was merely a mockery.

"Antwerp is too hot for you, father," I said, seeing how exhausted he was. "Don't you think, Mrs. Sandys, that Spa would be the best place in the world for him?"

"Much better than Antwerp," she agreed.

"Such a long journey," said father, shaking his head.

"Oh, no. We have gone many much longer journeys together," I replied, cheerfully; "and I am sure you would be a very great deal better there."

"It strikes me, child," said my father, dreamily, "that you and I won't make any more journeys together. I shall have to take one before very long and you will have to let me go alone."

He spoke in such a matter-of-fact tone that for a moment I positively did not understand him. Then I caught

sight of Mrs. Sandys's blue eyes swimming in tears, and the whole truth flashed upon me. I sat quite still, grasping my knife and fork hard, as a drowning man clutches at a straw; it was my only chance of keeping myself sufficiently calm to prevent a scene. I could feel the hot crimson tide rushing across my face, and gradually the faces of the people on the opposite side of the table faded into a blurred mist; and then I put down my knife and fork, and fairly ran out of the room. Once safely in my bedroom, I threw myself down upon the bed to cry aloud in my passion of distress; but I found that my tears refused to flow. Could it be possible that my father was speaking the truth or was he only joking? Could he make a joke so ghastly as that? No, gladly would I think it so, but my heart told me all too plainly that it was not so. Then I tried to think what my life would be like when he was gone, when there was no father. Should I go roaming about by myself, as we had always done. Should I— Then there came a gentle knock at the door between my room and the *salon*, and my father's voice said,—

“Nell, can I come in?”

He pushed the door open in answer to my reply and entered.

“Mrs. Sandys has been bullying me for teasing you, child,” he said, speaking quite lightly. He came beside the bed and bent over me.

I put my arm round his neck and drew his head down to me.

“It's not true, Daddy dear?” I whispered, piteously. “You were only teasing me?”

“That was all, of course,” he responded, laughing nervously; “and, as a proof of it, I am going out this evening with you. Really, Nell, you spoil me; it was high

time some one else came to rouse me out of my lazy habits."

"Will you really go out?" I cried, joyfully.

"Really, child. Put on your hat that we may not keep Mrs. Sandys waiting. Put on that pretty white one you wore the other day."

But the demon of suspicion which his careless words aroused at dinner was only half lulled to rest. My heart told me, as I watched him go out of the room, that surely laziness would never give his shoulders that thin, knife-like appearance, nor that hollowness to his cheeks, nor yet the hectic spot upon them; and yet, since I could remember, he was always the same, or very nearly the same.

"Why," I argued, as I looked in the glass, "any one to look at me might think the same. I have the same fever-flush on either cheek; the same brightness of the eyes; the same thinness of the shoulders." And yet, even while I tried to persuade myself, my heart told me that they were really not the same; that the flush on my face was only the outcome of emotion, the brightness of my eye only the brilliancy which repressed tears so often brings. I knew as I scanned them that the thinness of my shoulders was but the slenderness of youth, and, in spite of my father's assumed gaiety, my heart was very heavy as I went back to the *salon*.

And yet he was so merry, so delicately, satirically witty, that more than once I fancied I might have been mistaken; and, indeed, I was so anxious to prove myself so, that I was ready to go more than half-way to meet him.

"I think," he remarked, when he got back to the hotel, after an hour or more at the Zoo, "that we will make an effort and get on to Spa to-morrow. Will you go, Nell?"

"Oh, yes," replied Mrs. Sandys, willingly. "One place is as good as another to me; my time is entirely at your service; and really I think your little girl is quite right in saying that this place is too hot for you; it is like an oven."

"The season is hot," answered my father. "However, if you two will take all the management and responsibility upon yourselves, I am quite agreeable to a removal to that sweet, little place, Spa."

Then there followed a conversation, in which I took no part and but little interest, for each sentence began with, "Have you forgotten," or "Do you remember." For the first time in my life, I felt left out in the cold; but it did not annoy me at all. I went to one of the windows which was flung wide open, and leant out, enjoying the still evening air and gazing abstractedly at the great cathedral spire.

"Come and sing to us, Nell," said my father, after a while. His voice was so cheery, and had so little languor about it, that I felt quite convinced that he was only teasing me; and, being happy, I sang like a very nightingale out of sheer joy of heart.

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## CHAPTER III

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### GONE!

It was evening; we had accomplished the journey to Spa, and apparently my father was none the worse for it. Indeed, he looked so bright and well as he lay on the sofa near to the open window that I laughed at myself for the foolish fears I entertained but yesterday.

It was certainly very pleasant to have Mrs. Sandys travelling with us. She was clever and amusing, and her maid proved herself an invaluable courier. Besides being clever and amusing, Mrs. Sandys was always refreshing to the eye. Yes, she was decidedly an acquisition, and, although I had felt rather rebellious when I heard my father ask her to be a mother to me, I began to think that he knew what he was about.

"What is your boy called, Nell?" my father asked, suddenly.

"His name is Rufus."

"Rufus! Why, he hasn't red hair, surely?"

Mrs. Sandys laughed.

"It is as yellow as mine," she answered. "You see, the eldest son of the family has been named Rufus from time immemorial,—as long as there have been any family at all, that is to say. My husband, you know, was not the eldest son."

"No, I did not know it."

"He was the third son. His brother Rufus was killed in Africa; Arthur was drowned when quite a boy; and so John came in for the property."

"I see; so as a matter of course you called your boy Rufus. It's a good name, Nell."

"A fine name," she answered, quietly; "and the boy himself matches it."

"Yes, you said he was good-looking," said my father. "When he can get leave, we must have him over here. Then he and Nell can go about and see everything, and you can, of your charity, look after the old man."

"What old man?" I said, in surprise.

"Your respected father, my dear," he answered. "Oh, don't tell me I am not old. I am glad you and Mrs. Sandys do not consider me so; but, all the same, I cannot hide the fact from myself."

"You are forty-one," I said, indignantly; "and, if you are old at forty-one, pray what will you be like at sixty?"

My father laughed.

"At the rate I am going on, child, I shall probably have faded away into a mere remembrance; or else I shall become obese, and require a chair and bed made on purpose for me. In that case, Nell, if we should be so unfortunate as to lose our property, why, you shall make a show of me, and so turn an honest livelihood out of your fat father. I am afraid, though, that Mrs. Sandys will turn us the cold shoulder, and Rufus, the Hussar, would probably turn up his nose."

"More strange things than that will come to pass before I turn the cold shoulder upon you," said Mrs. Sandys, in a laughing tone.

"I'm not so sure about that," returned my father, quietly.

Apparently she was not so sure either, for she turned positively scarlet from chin to brow.

"Can you never forgive!" she murmured under her breath.

"Long since," he responded, readily; "but it is not so easy to forget, you know."

They did not seem to notice me, and I took up a book, for I did not care to go back with them over those twenty years of regret.

"Fane, would you really like Rufus to come over here?" I heard Mrs. Sandys say presently.

"Very much, indeed," answered my father.

"Yes; but suppose—— Oh, Fane, you know what I mean! Nell is no longer a child; at least, she is almost a woman, and Rufus might——"

"Might fall in love with her," suggested my father. "Is that what you mean, Nell? Or she might fall in love with your boy. Well, I am not afraid to trust her to commit the great folly of life as wisely as is practicable."

"And suppose that came about," she began.

"My dear Nell," said my father, quietly, "leave affairs of that kind to fate, chance, call it what you will; but don't turn match-maker in your old age. Remember what a mull you made of your own marriage."

"So I did," she sighed. "But still you would like it?"

"Yes, I should like it, if she liked it. Only don't worry about it. I am more than content, since you have promised to be her friend always. I am trusting you with the most precious thing I have."

"I will give my whole life to make her happy," she exclaimed, fervidly; "I will, indeed, Fane."

"Sacrifice everything upon the altar of friendship," laughed my father in his quizzical way. That was so like

him, to draw upon your feelings to the last extent, and immediately turn off the subject with a joke or some witty little sarcasm.

"Upon the altar of my friendship for her,—and you," she repeated, gravely.

It was evidently no laughing matter to her.

I shut up my book with a bang, and father said,—

"Nell, child, will you go into my room and fetch me a clean handkerchief?"

"I believe, Daddy dear, you are much better for coming to Spa," I said, giving him the handkerchief.

"I believe I am, child," he answered. "I feel more like myself to-night than I have felt for—how long shall I say?" looking across at Mrs. Sandys. "Suppose we put it at twenty years."

"Then you must feel well," she replied, brightly.

"Depend upon it, child," he said, turning to me, "that I have taken a turn, and am getting ready for that show I spoke of just now."

"You will want a good deal of padding on this," I said, taking his hand into my own.

"It will all come in time. Rome wasn't built in a day, you know. When Rufus comes, and I have you quite off my mind,—that is to say, when I know you are going here and there enjoying yourself,—I shall have nothing to do but listen to Mrs. Sandys and grow fat."

"Complimentary!" exclaimed Mrs. Sandys.

"I intended you to think it so," returned my father, with a grave bow.

"I must be thinking of retiring to rest," she said; "and so, I am sure, must you. Still, I believe you are very much better for your change of air. Really, Fane, Antwerp was enough to kill any one."

"I suppose it was," he admitted; "though I didn't think it possible I could find any place too hot for me. Eh, Nell?"

"No," I said, shaking my head and with difficulty repressing a yawn.

"Come, go to bed, child," he said, imperatively; and so I kissed him and went away.

I was so thoroughly tired that I fell asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow, and I had a dream. I dreamt that an angel came to me and bade me arise and follow him. So real was the dream, that I woke with a great start, to find the light of a lamp streaming into my eyes.

As soon as I had grown sufficiently accustomed to the dazzling light to distinguish anything, I saw Mrs. Sandys's face bending over me.

"Is anything the matter?" I asked, sleepily.

"Get up at once, dear child," she said, gently.

"Father!" I gasped, my energies all awake in a moment. "Is he ill?"

"Yes, my dear," she answered, gravely.

"Not very ill?" I said, imploringly, as I hurried on my slippers and dressing-gown.

She took me into her arms and kissed me tenderly.

"Oh, my darling!" she murmured, in a voice of pity.

I broke from her and rushed to my father's room. He was lying back upon the pillows, which, like the sheets, were stained with blood. Forgetful of everything like caution, I threw myself upon the bed with a passionate cry.

"Little Nell," he gasped; then groped along the bed for his old love's hand, laid mine in it with an effort, smiled upon us gently—and was gone!

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## CHAPTER IV

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### NEW RELATIONS

YES, he was gone; but at first I did not realise it.

"See, he has fainted!" I cried, seizing Mrs. Sandys by the arm. "Why don't you get brandy, or something,—anything to restore him?"

"He wants nothing more in this world," she answered, in a hushed voice. "We can do nothing for him now, Nell."

"What do you mean?" I asked, looking first at her and then at the quiet figure on the bed. "He is not *dead*!" I said, incredulously.

If I had needed anything more to convince me of the dread truth, the distress with which she flung herself down beside the bed would have been enough.

"Oh, Fane, Fane, my darling!" she cried, passionately, "I never forgot you—never, dear! Night and day it was my first love who filled my thoughts, and when I find you, it is thus!"

She spread out her arms in pathetic desolation; the lamp-light gleamed down upon the masses of her fair, ruffled hair, upon the pallid beauty of her face and the tearless agony in her blue eyes as they gazed with eager greediness upon my father's still, dead face.

Strangely enough, I remained quite unmoved. Many a time I have wept copiously over a mimic death upon a

stage; then, when all that I loved in the wide world was lying lifeless before me, my eyes were dry and there was no particular sense of sorrow in my heart. I leant against the end of the bed, watching them, my dead father and his old love, and I wondered dimly if she could not see that none of his old love for her had remained with him.

Presently she rose from her knees and took my hand in hers.

"He gave you to me, Nell," she said, brokenly; "and you must be my dear daughter, and we must try to love each other, for the love we both had for him."

"Had!" How strange it sounded! Had he passed already into a "has-been"? I looked at her, and then at him, in a vain attempt to realise all that had happened.

"Mrs. Sandys," I began.

"Could you not call me mother, Nell?" she said,—in, oh, such a yearning voice, that I almost forgot all except her distress.

"I will call you mother, if you wish it," I said. "But are you quite sure he is really dead?"

"My darling," she answered, "the doctor is still here; ask him yourself, child."

"Oh, sir," I said, turning to the doctor, whose presence I had not as yet noticed, "is it really true?"

"I am sorry, mademoiselle," he answered, gently; "it is, alas, quite true!"

"Come, darling, we must go away," said Mrs. Sandys, kindly.

"But where? I couldn't go to bed—I——"

"No, no, dear; into the *salon*."

I followed her listlessly into the little *salon*, which as yet had not any impression of our occupancy. It was

just as we had left it, scarcely four hours before. The clock on the chimney-shelf struck three as we entered, and various other clocks in the house took up the sound.

"What made it so sudden?" I asked, abruptly. "He was much better when I went to bed; better than he has been for a long time."

"I don't know, dear," she replied. "I did not stay five minutes after you left the room. Like you, I thought—perhaps because I wished it so—that he was much better. My room is, you know, next to his, and for some reason I could not sleep. Then I heard a sound, a sort of smothered cry, and, jumping out of bed, I slipped on a dressing-gown and knocked at his door. There was no answer, so I opened it, and then I saw—that—he had broken a blood-vessel!"

"A blood-vessel," I repeated, stupidly.

"I roused the house, and sent off for a doctor, and when I came back he whispered 'Nell,' and I came for you."

"And if it had not been for you," I cried, "he would have died all alone in the dark, and I should never have heard him speak again!"

She clasped her arms closely round me, but she did not speak, and presently I felt hot tears dropping upon my face. If only I could have wept like that!

During the next two days I did not sleep at all, and tears seemed as far from me as from my dear one lying in that hushed room alone. I could not eat either, and took no interest in the mourning which Mrs. Sandys ordered for me. I would, for my own part, much rather not have worn it. Father hated a black dress of any sort; indeed, I had never had one since my step-mother died; and even then, as it was summer, and we were

moving about, he insisted upon my wearing white after the first few weeks.

"A monster sham; a huge hypocrisy, Nell," I can remember his saying once, when we came across an English party in crape from head to foot, and an infectious jolliness pervading them all. "Fancy taking a regular 'pleasuring' in all those outward symbols of inconsolable grief! Ah, the more outside, Nell, the less in the heart!"

I expressed my views to "Mother," as I was learning to call her, but she was horrified at the idea.

"You must wear mourning, Nell," she said, gravely; "it will look so strange if you do not."

"I think, dear mother," I answered, wearily, "that my heart will be in mourning for ever; and he did hate it so. I think it is wrong to do just what he disliked, as soon as he is gone."

"You shall have it without crape trimmings," she said, persuasively.

"Very well," I replied; "if you think it necessary, of course I must have it."

At the end of two days came the funeral, and, not a little to my surprise, it was attended by a good many of the English staying in the place. I felt sure that my father would be very much obliged to them for taking so much trouble, if he knew of it. Perhaps, from his home high up above the glorious blue sky, he did know it all, and perhaps he wondered that his little Nell should have thought it necessary to drape herself in all this terrible black. Just as we reached the grave a lady in mourning, whom I had never seen before, stepped forward with a wreath of lovely white flowers, such as would have given dear father the keenest pleasure, as if to lay them on the coffin; then, by a sudden impulse, instead

of doing so herself, she put them silently into my hand. The simple action unloosed the flood-gates of my sorrow, and the blessed tears came gushing to my eyes, so that I wept unrestrainedly until we were back in the hotel.

"Who was the lady who gave me the flowers?" I asked, some hours later, of Mrs. Sandys.

"I enquired as soon as we got back," she replied. "It was a Mrs. De la Motte."

"I should like to go and thank her," I said, wistfully. Mrs. Sandys looked doubtful.

"Darling," she said, gently, "I think, for many reasons, it will be our wisest plan to return to London at once; there will be so many business matters to arrange."

"Mr. Barton knows everything," I told her. "He has father's will—everything."

"Is he your solicitor?"

"Yes; he managed all father's affairs."

"Then the sooner we go to him the better. I have your father's will."

"You!" I cried, in surprise.

"Yes, dear; he made a new one the evening before we left Antwerp; see, it is here."

I took it from her hand and read it, though it brought the scalding tears to my eyes; it was very short, and was written by himself throughout.

"Everything of which I die possessed I leave to my dear child, Geraldine Ferrers. As the sole executor of my will, and as sole guardian of my child, I appoint my old friend, Helen Sandys, of Hutton Road, Blankshire."

There was a sentence making provision for my guardianship in case of Mrs. Sandys's death, and then came the signature, "Fane Ferrers," and below it two other

names as witnesses, both of them English gentlemen staying in the hotel.

I gave it back to Mrs. Sandys without speaking, and she went on telling me of her plans, adding,—

“And, as we shall have to start very early, dear, I am afraid you will not be able to go and see Mrs. De la Motte.”

“I should like to write and thank her, then,” I said, “and, if you don’t mind, to send her a photograph of dear Daddy.”

“If I don’t mind!” she echoed. “My dearest child, I must have you understand at once that you are to have everything just as you wish; nothing that I can obtain for you shall ever be denied you.”

“I wonder why you are so good to me?” I said, thoughtfully.

The tears rushed to her eyes as she took my hand.

“Darling,” she answered, “by the bond of our mutual love.”

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## CHAPTER V

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### “RUFUS”

EARLY the following morning we were up and away for England, the land of my forefathers, and to which I was almost a stranger. Until the train moved slowly out of the station, I did not realise all that I was leaving behind me. It was the first time that I had ever found myself in a railway-carriage without my father, and it would be hard for me to say how much I missed the soft, dusky eyes, the pleasant, deliberate voice, or how wildly my heart went out to the quiet grave where we had laid him but yesterday. I strained my eyes to catch a last glimpse of the little town he loved so well, and where the paths of our life's journey crossed, to run together never more; and then the scalding tears shut out the too painful view, and, leaning back in my seat, I wept, not passionately or hysterically, but with the quiet blankness of despair. I tried to look forward into the dim vista of the future, but its utter blankness baffled my attempt; I dared not look back into the past, for I could not think of that without realising all that had gone out of my life for ever; so only the present was left to me, and that was terrible.

By the time we reached Ostend my head was aching furiously; indeed, it was so bad that Mrs. Sandys left our luggage entirely to the charge of her maid, and devoted

herself altogether to me. I laid in my berth in our little cabin and submitted to her gentle ministrations gratefully; but it was not until we were safely in the railway-carriage and on our way to London that I fell asleep.

"Is this London?" I asked, as we glided by the dismal-looking houses.

"You must not judge London by this view, dear child," said Mrs. Sandys, kindly; "wait until you have seen the Parks and Oxford Street,—see Piccadilly before you condemn the town."

"I don't think I condemn anything," I returned, wearily. "I know it is all very ugly, and I wish I were anywhere else; even in Antwerp, though it was so hot. Father never liked London, and I know I shall not like it either."

"There was a time, dear, when your father thought no place on earth equal to it," she told me. "Just now you are fatigued and overheated; but when you have seen your own room, had a bath, breakfast, and a drive, you will tell me quite a different story. See, here we are at Charing Cross Station, and there is James waiting for us. I am glad!"

"James! Who is he?" I asked.

"Only a footman, child."

All the same, it was very pleasant to have a footman waiting to help us out, collect our wraps, and pilot us through the crowd of busy, not too polite, people, who thronged the platform.

A neat brougham was waiting outside the station for us, and I sank back against the well-padded cushions, feeling that it was even more comfortable than the railway-carriage we had left.

"Trafalgar Square," said Mrs. Sandys, as I looked out

at the lions and the fountains. “That is the National Gallery.”

“Oh,” I remarked, listlessly. I did not like to say anything against Trafalgar Square and the National Gallery, but I thought they were frightfully ugly, scarcely a shade better than the houses I had noticed from the railway.

“The Haymarket,” said she, pointing to a building in a broad street, up which we turned.

“It looks like a theatre,” I remarked, at which she laughed.

“It is a theatre, child,” she said, in an amused tone.

I said “Oh!” again, and began to wish my father had brought me to London sometimes, so that I should not have been ignorant of what apparently every one ought to know.

“Now look out,” she said, “and tell me if London is all quite ugly.”

“No; I like this,” I answered. “It is like the boulevards. What is this street called?”

“Piccadilly,” she answered. “We shall be at home presently.”

In a very short time we turned to the right and in a few minutes drew up at the door of a house the windows of which were as bright as a profusion of flowers and snowy lace curtains could make them.

“Oh, how pretty!” I cried.

“I am so glad you like it,” she said, warmly, “for, of course, we live here for nearly half the year. Now, Charles, has Mr. Sandys come?”

“Yes, ma’am; early this morning,” answered Charles, who was, I afterwards found, the butler.

The hall, too, was bright with flowers and tall plants, and was carpeted all over like a room, and was hung with

pictures and huge looking-glasses, weapons, china, and brasses. Outside each of the doors were curtains of mulberry-coloured cloth, bordered with gold, suspended from brass rods and looped back by brass chains. There was a great open fireplace, filled then with ferns and flowers, and three or four easy-chairs and settees. To me it was more like a *salon* than a vestibule.

Before I had time to take in my new surroundings, a door on our left opened and a young man appeared.

"Well, mother," he said, coming forward and just brushing her cheek with his own, "you are here."

"Yes. This is Miss Ferrers, Rufus. For the future she will live with us."

He held out his hand, and I laid mine in it silently. I was somewhat confused by so many new things.

"I am very glad you are coming to live with my mother," he said, courteously, "though very sorry for the trouble you have been through."

He spoke so simply and so kindly that, though the tears rushed to my eyes, and I felt my lips quivering, I could not help liking him at once.

"You are distressing the child, Rufus," said his mother, sharply.

"Oh, no, no!" I cried, hastily, for a scarlet flush had swept over his fair face which in its turn confused me. "It was only that I had forgotten for a moment."

The tears were rolling down my face then and falling in heavy scalding drops upon my hands; I tried to check them, for I felt somehow that they were making Mrs. Sandys vexed with her son. He, with a man's usual horror of a scene, was looking irresolutely at me, as if he longed to run away, yet did not like to do so. Then I remembered how my father would have walked five

miles rather than be let in for a scene of any sort or have to face a crying woman, and the remembrance, instead of increasing my tears, made me laugh; so laughing, with the tears still wet upon my face, I held out my hand again to him.

“Don’t look so forlorn,” I said. “It was very good of you to speak to me so kindly, for I dare say I shall be a great trouble to you.”

Both mother and son looked so pleased that my heart went out to them afresh.

“Never a trouble; will she, Rufus?” said Mrs. Sandys, as graciously as if she had never given him a cross look in her life.

“Indeed, no,” he answered, quickly.

“Now, darling,” she said, turning to me, “let us go upstairs, and I will show ~~you~~ your room, the room which will always be yours when we are in town.”

It seemed to me that it must be the best room in the house; it looked out upon the Park and was large and lofty. The windows and the bed were hung with white material lined with pink, and there were flowers on either side of the toilet-glass, on the little side-table, where there were writing materials, and outside the windows.

“I never saw such a lovely room!” I cried.

“I am so glad that you like it,” she said, stroking my hand with her own. “But, dear, luncheon will be ready in ten minutes.”

She left me alone then, and I made haste to bathe my face—which was, I knew, dreadfully dirty—in the clear, cool water. Then I opened my dressing-case and took out my combs and brushes.

“She must have cared a great deal for father,” I said to myself, as I combed out the rings of dark hair over

my forehead. "Of course, it could not be all for myself that she is so kind; for, though I used to be pretty enough, my good looks have all gone."

I could see nothing in the glass to admire any more. I told myself that the beauty my father was always so proud of must have depended very much upon my dress, for now that I had to wear this dreadful black—how he would have hated it!—I seemed just a haggard, pale, pinched, hungry-looking creature, all eyes and mouth.

All the same, a clean face and tidy hair did help to improve my appearance wonderfully, and with a silver brooch and belt—how well I remembered his buying them when we were in Norway!—I did not look so utterly lost and forlorn as ten minutes before.

Then I went downstairs somewhat doubtful as to the position of the dining-room, and fortunately met Rufus Sandys in the hall.

"I came down, hoping that I might meet with some one," I observed; "for I have not the slightest idea where to go."

"This is the dining-room," he answered, opening a door. "We may as well go in here at once. My mother will be down directly, I dare say."

"I have never been in an English house before, you know," I remarked. "We only came to London when my father *had* to come for business, and then we stayed in hotels. How different it all is from the Continent."

"I suppose it is. I know Paris rather well, and I have been up the Rhine; but otherwise my travels in foreign parts have been limited."

"And I have never done anything else," I rejoined, smiling. "Well, we shall have a great deal in common, shall we not?"

“ I hope so, Miss Ferrers,” he answered.

“ Oh, pray, do not be so formal ! ” I cried, hastily. It seemed so absurd, when I was to call Mrs. Sandys “ Mother,” that her son should call me “ Miss Ferrers.” “ Do say Nell, please.”

“ May I ? ”—very eagerly.

“ Certainly. All the same, I do not tell every one to call me so. All the people we met abroad said Miss Ferrers ; of course, you are different.”

“ I am glad of that.”

“ Glad of what ? ” asked Mrs. Sandys, coming in.

“ That Miss Ferrers thinks me so different from ordinary people that she has given me permission to call her Nell.”

Mrs. Sandys laughed.

“ Come and eat,” she said, imperatively. “ And, when you have refreshed yourself, I am going to ask you to let Rufus take you out for a drive. My head is aching a little—it always does after a sea-passage.”

“ And it was a choppy sea,” I remarked, with the utmost commiseration. “ No wonder your head is bad.”

“ You have become quite learned in nautical terms,” she said, smiling.

“ I don’t know what a rough passage may be like,” I said, “ but they told me that last night there was a choppy sea. It was horrible ! ”

I was really very hungry after our long journey. Rufus looked after me politely, and did not seem at all shocked by my huge appetite. Mrs. Sandys insisted on my drinking champagne, saying that it was a wonderful restorative after sea-sickness.

“ Mrs. Sandys,—at least,—I mean mother,” I said, hastily, when the time appointed for our drive was draw-

ing near, "I have heard father say that ladies always wear bonnets in London. Is that so?"

"Well, they used to do. Now they wear hats,—but very small hats," she replied.

"I have nothing in the least smart," I said.

"Would you like to go and get anything you want this afternoon?" she suggested. "You could leave Rufus in the carriage, you know."

"Yes," I answered. "He was always so particular about my dress, and, if he were here, and I was slovenly, he would be dreadfully worried."

"I do not think he would care, darling," she answered, with the tears in her blue eyes and a little quivering at the corners of her mouth, which made a great lump rise in my throat. "But, by all means, get everything you think he would have liked best, you little faithful darling."

"Rufus, will you mind going with me?" I asked, turning to him, as soon as I could command my voice. "I dare not encounter all those people alone. I never went to an English shop, you know."

"I should like it immensely," he answered, readily. "And really I know a great deal about shopping,—far more than you would give me credit for, Nell."

"About shopping?" cried his mother, in surprise.

"Yes, mother, about shopping," he repeated.

"Ah! Well, it is a good thing for Nell. Have you any money, dear?"—turning to me. "I suppose your father made you an allowance?"

"Yes, I believe father had about eleven hundred a year," I replied. "I spent about a hundred a year on my dress."

"A hundred a year at sixteen!" she said, patting my hand. "Well, child, we must not put you on short com-

mons, now that you have eleven hundred a year of your own.”

“He was very fidgety about my dress and looks altogether,” I said. “Oh, how my face just now would have worried him!” putting up my hand to rub a sunburnt patch across my nose, which looked like an island of doubtful colour in a sea of pallor.

“It will soon pass off,” she declared. “Now come to my room and I will give you some money.”

“Might we not go straight to some milliners?” I asked, “so that I should be quite *en règle* for the drive?”

“Certainly, child, if it will please you. Tell Rufus to drive you to Mignonette’s, in Bond Street, and then take you into the Park. There will scarcely be any one there, but you will get some air.”

“Very well,” I answered. “Good-bye.”

A little to my surprise, she kissed me before I left her. But how pleasant it is when people are fond of you.

I found Rufus waiting in the hall when I went down.

“Oh, Rufus,” I said, “do you think I might take a white parasol? I haven’t got a black one, and I don’t like to go without. Father never let me.”

“Oh, yes,” he answered. “Why not? Every one uses them here.”

“Yes, but I have to wear this black,”—glancing down at my sable attire. “Though he wouldn’t have liked it at all,” I added, not a little rebelliously.

“Then it’s too bad to make you wear it,” he said, warmly.

“But about this sunshade,” I continued, holding out the white one for his inspection.

“I should use it, by all means,” he said, taking it out of my hand. “I’m sure it’s awfully pretty.”

The carriage awaiting us was a victoria, drawn by a pair of gray cobs, and was quite the most perfect equipage of its kind that I had ever seen.

"Father would have been in ecstasies over it," I told my companion, as we drove away from the door.

"Yes, it's a pretty little turn-out," he answered. "It was my mother's choice. She has great taste."

"Why, what a little way!" I exclaimed, as the carriage stopped. "I thought every place in London was an immense distance from everywhere else."

Rufus Sandys laughed outright.

"Some places are, of course; but Bond Street and Park Lane are just next door to each other."

Then we went into the shop. I was horribly nervous, for this was my first experience of an English shop, and I fancied that the silk-robed individual who received us had no great opinion of us. She addressed me as "Modome," and it was wonderful what a strange effect the word had upon me. Did the woman take me for Rufus Sandys's wife? I told her I wanted to see some hats.

"In black, modome? For mourning?"

"Yes, I am in mourning," I replied.

Then she rustled away, and I turned to Rufus.

"Does she think we're married?" I asked in a whisper. He turned scarlet, but laughed.

"I don't know; why?"

"Why! Because she called me 'Madame'!"

"Oh, they do that in all the shops here. You know, it's not the right thing to say 'Miss.'"

"Does modome wish feathers in her hat?" said a smooth voice at my elbow.

"Feathers?" I repeated. "Yes, if they are fashionable."

Then I explained that I had only just come to England, and must trust her to provide me with a proper head-dress. She told me I might safely do so, and forthwith fitted a helmet of silk and feathers on my head. To me it was frightfully ugly.

"I don't like it," I said.

"It is the fashion, modome," she returned, severely.

"Oh!" I remarked, feeling very small and snubbed. "Well, I don't like it at all. It is too heavy. I look all head, and it is so—so English. Have you nothing more simple."

"Does modome wish something less expensive?" she asked.

"No; I wish for something simple," I answered.

In two minutes she produced a French hat, which I told her I would have before it touched my head. It was twice the price of the other, but I cared nothing about that. I kept it on, and she put my hat into a box, which was stowed away under the seat of the carriage.

Then, just as we were leaving, I remembered my white sunshade, and asked for a black one. I found one to suit me more easily than the hat, and then we got into the carriage again, and were driven away.

"Rufus," I said presently, "if I ask you a question, you won't be offended, will you?"

"Of course not,"—with an amused smile on his lips, which his slight golden moustache was not sufficiently long to hide.

"You are quite sure?"

"Perfectly."

"Well, are Trafalgar Square and the National Gallery considered very beautiful?"

At this he laughed aloud.

"I don't think so. I never heard so. Why? Have they struck you as models of architectural beauty?"

"Oh, dear, no," I answered. "But this morning, as we came from the station, Mrs. Sandys said 'Trafalgar Square!'—just so; and I thought that, perhaps, I ought to be very proud of it, and admire it very much."

"But you did not," he laughed. "Neither do I. This is better, is it not?"

I looked from side to side at the gay shops, and acknowledged that Oxford Street was charming; then the thought that he who had described this very street to me so often was not with me on this my first sight of it, that he was lying in his quiet grave at Spa, and that now hundreds of miles lay between us, who never since my birth spent a day apart, brought the scalding tears to my eyes and I leant back in the carriage and wept bitterly.

The storm passed after a while, as such storms do, exhausted by its very intensity, and I dried my eyes and looked apologetically up at my companion. He had turned his back upon me, and was regarding the passers-by with an intentness born of annoyance, or perhaps of a conviction that I should be best left to myself.

"Rufus," I said, in a very small voice, at which he turned quickly to me, "I am afraid you will think me a very unpleasant person to take anywhere; but, indeed, I could not help it."

"I do not think you unpleasant, Nell," he answered, quietly, and I was comforted at once.

"It is all so new and strange yet," I continued, leaning back again and looking up at him, "and I cannot get used to it. I wonder if I ever shall?" I added, in a hopeless undertone.

"I hope so," he said, simply.

“So do I,” I returned; “for, if I do not, I shall assuredly go out of my mind. It seems such a long time since I saw him,—such a long, long, sickening time,—and yet it is only five short days ago that he was so much better,—better than he had been for years. Only five days, Rufus, but it seems such a long time. Five days! They seem like five centuries. I wonder when I shall see him again?” I said, dreamily, then started with a sudden new pain at my heart. “Oh, Rufus, I have all my life to live before I can see him again!”

“You must live it,” he answered, pitifully.

“And perhaps I shall live fifty years,” I cried, wearily. “I really don’t think I can. Fifty years! Oh, it is impossible! Why, now, after five days, I am simply yearning to see him. I am sickening for the sound of his voice.”

“Fancy caring for any one like that,” he murmured.

“Like that!” I echoed, impatiently. “Why, just think what you would feel if your mother died.”

He shrugged his shoulders slightly.

“My mother has not made me care for her like that,” he said, quietly; “in fact, all my life I have had to live without the love of which you seem to have had so much. No one ever did love me a great deal.”

“No one?” I cried.

“No one,” he repeated, a little sadly; then a hard expression flitted across his face, and he laughed a hard, mirthless laugh. “And, really, I don’t know that it’s such a bad thing. The greater a love is, the greater seems to be the losing of it.”

I shook my head resolutely. It came to me all in a flash that even if I should live for fifty years, and never met with any other love than that infinitely tender one which had been mine for nearly seventeen years, I should

still have that memory to comfort me. Let the voices of the world be ever so harsh, there would still live in my heart the sound of one which was always sweet, always loving, always soft and low in tone; let the eyes of men and women be hard as steel, I should still see those soft, dusky orbs, kindly as they were beautiful; let the hearts I might meet in my life's journey be as stones to me, nothing could take from me that truest love beating up yonder in Heaven. No, they were mine, and would always be mine, the kindly eyes, the loving heart, and the gentle smooth voice; they would always be mine, no matter what might befall me. I sighed again, but it was wonderful how I was comforted.

"Some day, Rufus," I said, turning to him, "you will find out that you are wrong."

"Perhaps I may," he answered, quietly. "How old are you, Nell?"

"Nearly seventeen."

"Seventeen," he echoed, "and you talk like seven-and-twenty. Who would take you for my junior, I wonder?"

"Nobody with any sense," I answered, smiling. "True, you are older than I am in years, but in experience you are a mere baby compared with me. You have spent all your life in education, books, and in learning your profession; but I—why, Rufus,—I have never been at school in my life."

"Really?"

"Never. We never stayed in one place long enough. Oh, I have had the strangest life any girl ever had. All I know, I have picked up. But I really know nothing. I can speak a few languages, and I can play and sing, but I know scarcely anything."

"My good child, what do you wish for more?" he cried.

"Well, I have met English girls," I answered, modestly, "who knew all about grammar, and geography, and sewing, and housekeeping; all sorts of fancy-work, too, they could do, but I cannot. I never had the chance of learning such things. Of course, I grew up to speak several languages equally well. Father always spoke English to me; but they tell me I have a foreign accent. French, German, and Italian are all the same to me, and I know a dozen different *patois*. I think that, perhaps, the most successful of my studies was music; for, of course, if there was a *conservatoire* in a town where we stayed, I always attended it; and if there was not, why, good masters were easy to find."

"I am very glad you sing," he said, heartily; "I am tremendously fond of music. I shall get you to play and sing to me all day long, if you will."

"Of course, if you like it. My father was very fond of it, too. He used to lie for hours listening to me, sometimes when I thought he was asleep. But he always knew everything I had played or sung. I will play to you this evening, if Mrs. Sandys's head is not still aching."

It was late in the afternoon when we reached home, but I felt all the better for the drive, and we found Mrs. Sandys all the better for her rest. She was, indeed, already in the drawing-room, when we went in, and asked if Rufus had taken care of me.

"Very well, indeed," I answered, cheerfully. "And how do you like my hat?"

"It is very pretty; and you have a black parasol, too. Did you get that also at Mignonette's?"

"Yes; but Rufus thinks, as I do, that the white one is prettier, and quite black enough."

"Rufus knows nothing about it," she responded, calmly.

"I should as soon think of consulting Charles about my dress as Rufus."

"Perhaps, if you consulted me once," said Rufus, coldly, "you might find I do know a little about it."

"Possibly." Then she turned to me. "Now, darling, should you not be going to dress?"

"I have no black evening dress, you know," I answered, "except one which is all braided with gold."

"That will not do," she said, shaking her head.

"I can wear a white dress to-night, if you don't mind, and then to-morrow we can get a proper black one."

"Very well, my dear."

And so I went away, thinking, as I ascended the stairs, that Mrs. Sandys must be very strange to be able to take me into her heart so readily, and yet refuse admittance to her only child. Poor Rufus! How defiant he looked when he said it was as well not to have love, since the losing of it was so hard. I wondered if he would like his mother to love him? Evidently, or he would not have spoken in that bitter way about it. And then I fell to reflecting, as I stood at the window of my bedroom. How she must have hated him,—her husband,—and how she must have loved dear father always! And yet, what a strange kind of love that could voluntarily sacrifice itself for mere money. Perhaps I could not understand, never having had them, the value of a town-house, a great estate, a long train of servants, and half a dozen carriages; but, after all, it seemed to me that they would be a poor consolation for my lost Daddy. Perhaps, like me, she too felt their worthlessness when she had lost him; and yet, as he had said, our wandering, unambitious life would scarcely have suited her, or even contented her for long. What is, is best.

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## CHAPTER VI

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### EN FAMILLE

WHEN I began to dress, I realised the value of wealth, for my toilet-table was spread out with all the things I was most likely to require, and Mrs. Sandys's maid had made good use of the keys I had entrusted to her care.

I was almost dressed when the maid came to help me.

"I am accustomed to dressing myself," I told her, "and am just ready, thank you."

"Let me arrange your train, ma'am," she said, civilly.

I found her assistance very acceptable, and, when I had fastened the broad black velvet belt round my waist and had clasped the string of pearls that were my father's last birthday gift to me round my throat, I was ready to go down.

Mrs. Sandys was already in the drawing-room, and Rufus was leaning against the chimney-shelf, his hands behind him. He looked at me approvingly.

"It is an awful shame to make you wear all that black," he said, warmly.

"And dear father would be so vexed," I rejoined.

"I am afraid she must wear it, Rufus," his mother said, in almost a deprecating tone.

"I suppose so, but it's a great pity," he persisted.

"What do you think of Rufus?" Mrs. Sandys said to me later on, when we were in the drawing-room together,

he having gone to the library to write a letter. "He is good-looking, is he not?"

"He is very good-looking," I answered; "and he is very kind."

"I am glad you like him," she said, quietly; "for, of course, you will see a good deal of him. He must teach you to ride when we go down to Hutton Royal."

"Very well," I replied; "only I can ride a little."

"Can you? Then he shall take you out to-morrow, and I will do some of your necessary shopping for you. Have you a habit?"

"Yes," I answered, wondering if she thought father had brought me up like a savage, or allowed me to ride in a gown.

"Here is Rufus. Nell rides a little, Rufus; so you must take her out to-morrow. You can ride Ostentation, and Nell shall have Molly."

"I have brought Taglioni up with me, thanks," he replied. "Molly is my mother's special pet," he added, turning to me.

"She is very quiet and safe," Mrs. Sandys said. "I am not an accomplished horsewoman. I am always afraid of breaking my limbs or my neck, and I am very glad to get home again."

"In fact, my mother only rides for the look of the thing," Rufus told me, laughingly; "not for the love of it at all."

"Exactly," she admitted, good-humouredly; "but you can make Nell into a first-rate horsewoman, provided you do not injure her in the process."

Rufus looked at me without speaking, but I understood that he would not hurt me for the world.

"I wish you would play something," he said presently.

"Oh, yes!"

I played one or two little pieces,—a scrap of Nils Gade's "Kalanus," a lullaby of Gounod's, and a Nocturne of Chopin; then, without waiting to be asked, I began to sing. The room was pleasant to sing in, and the piano suited my voice; so I sang on from one song to another until I thought they must be tired of listening to me.

"Could you sing one Scotch song?" asked Rufus.

"Fifty, if you like," I answered. I sang "Bonnie Dundee;" and when the gay, rollicking song was ended, I left the piano and asked Rufus to let me hear him.

"I—sing," he echoed; "why, I've no more voice than an old crow."

"Did you not tell me how tremendously fond of music you were?" I demanded, copying his tone.

"Yes, but I meant of hearing it. I did not say that I was musical myself."

"Oh!" I said, blankly. "That seems to me a very lazy way of being tremendously fond of music."

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## CHAPTER VII

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### CIGARETTE

WHEN I entered the breakfast-room the following morning, I found a dog resting his head on my chair. He was a huge creature, the like of which I had never seen before. I felt inclined to keep a safe distance from him, but Rufus reassured me.

"Bloodhounds are always gentle," he told me. "Come here, sir."

The hound raised his great head majestically, and turned in my direction, favouring me with a long stare. Then, when I had seated myself, he rested his head on the edge of the table and fixed his sunken eyes upon me.

"What is your name?" I asked him, smoothing his huge head with my hand.

"His names," answered Rufus, "are many. You see, Nell, he is such a big person that we have named him to match his size, thus: Robin Sylvester Sims Reeves Mario Pergolesi Sandys! Robin is his ordinary name, usually shortened to 'Bob.' Sylvester is an old family name; and the others are on account of his extraordinary musical abilities."

"Really!" I laughed, while Bob pricked up his great flap ears, or I should say moved them a little, and pressed a little closer to me. "I believe he has taken a fancy to me," I exclaimed, quite proudly, "I always thought bloodhounds were the most ferocious dogs in creation."

"Bob is an unusually stupid person," Rufus replied, "and will play like a perfect baby with any one who will play with him. He has taken a fancy to Nell, mother."

"Yes? He never will condescend to notice me at all," she said, with a laugh. "I think, if he had done so, I should have begged him of you; he is such a beautiful animal."

"Then he belongs to you?" I said to Rufus.

"He does," he replied; "why, would you like to have him?"

"I don't know. Very much, if his fancy continues; but not at all if he should prove awkward."

"We shall see how you and he get on during the next fortnight."

"Did you get a fortnight's leave, Rufus?" his mother asked.

"Yes."

"That will be very nice. I dare say we shall be ready to go down to Hutton Royal by then," she said, pleasantly.

"Any more coffee, Nell?"

"No, thank you," I answered.

"Well, my dear, I am going out to do some shopping. It is now after ten, and there is a good deal to be done that I can do without you. If you will come into my room for ten minutes, I can put a list of the things down."

I did follow her, and listened while she explained to me what were things essential to me now that I was to live in England.

"This afternoon you must see about the things that I cannot choose without you," she ended.

"Very well. At what time are we to ride?"

"At any time you like. I should go about eleven, if I were you. Lunch is at two o'clock."

"Very well. Meantime Rufus has asked me to look at the horses," I said; "so, if you don't want me, I will go now."

She assented, and I departed. I fetched a hat from my room and went downstairs, to find Rufus still in the breakfast-room, with a newspaper and a cigarette.

"Hullo! Where are you going?" he demands, seeing my hat.

"To the stables with Mr. Rufus Sandys," I answered.

He threw down the newspaper and jumped up.

The stables struck me as very different from my idea of English stables. Everything was very clean, and the victoria, which was just ready to go round for Mrs. Sandys, was as bright as a new pin.

"Come in here first," said Rufus, opening a door on my right.

I followed him obediently, and was shewn the animal I was to ride,—Mrs. Sandys's mare, Molly.

"She looks awfully quiet," I remarked, as Rufus thumped her vigorously, to which she vouchsafed no notice.

"Indeed, she is. You needn't be in the least nervous when you are on her. She's as steady as old Time."

"H'm," I murmured. "And whose is this?"

"That is Ostentation," he answered. "When the mater does ride, I believe her groom rides him. I say, George, how does it happen that my mother has so many horses in town just now?"

"Stables at Hutton Royal having a turn out, sir," the man answered; "they've had the roof off the west block, and new fittings throughout."

"I see."

"We was going down as to-day," he further volun-

teered; "but when missis came back, in course we stopped."

George's English was the most remarkable I had ever heard in my life. He said "storped." Rufus told me, as we crossed the yard to the opposite stable, that it was pure Cockney. I had often wondered what Cockney was, but I had no idea it was so bad.

"There is the old brougham horse," said Rufus, breaking in upon my reflections, and pointing to a big brown animal, who looked at me in the same meditative way as Bob did at breakfast—by the bye, all this time Bob was marching majestically at my heels; so the "fancy" had not faded yet. "And this is Taglioni," added Rufus, as we moved on.

I cried aloud in admiration, and ran into the stable, despite his warning hand and voice.

"Take care, Nell; for heaven's sake take care," he cried; "she's very uncertain."

"Uncertain!" I echoed, contemptuously. "Why, 'tis Cigarette, my very own Cigarette; and you know your old Nell again, don't you?"

That she knew me was evident. Every nerve in her smooth, sleek, shining black coat was quivering, her four bonny feet were fidgeting restlessly, and her soft nose was rubbing against my face and shoulder in the most affectionate way.

"Have you seen her before?" Rufus asked, at last.

"Seen her before!" I cried. "Why, she's mine; she belongs to me. She was stolen from us last year in Rome, and we could never trace her,—or, rather, my father never could worry about it. Pet," I added, turning to the mare again, "to give you such a horrid name as Taglioni! Why did you, Rufus?"

"Because she dances about so," he laughed. "But, Nell, you don't mean to say you have ridden her? In that case you won't want much teaching."

"I never said I wanted any," I answered. "It was Mrs. Sandys, if you remember."

"By Jove! How strange that she should belong to you!" he repeated, in surprise. "I must give her up to you now."

"Nonsense," I said, laughing. "You bought her at a fair price, didn't you? I say, Rufus, you'll let me ride her to-day?"

"I don't know what the mater will say if I do," he said, doubtfully.

"She cannot say anything when she knows that Cigarette is my own old pet," I urged.

"Very well." He was very reluctant, but I danced away lightly to prepare for our ride, and was down again before the horses were saddled.

"You are going to carry your old mistress once again, you beauty," I said to Cigarette. "There; now help me up here, Rufus."

"Had we not better have them brought round?"

"Oh, no! I would rather mount here. Is my habit all right, quite correct?"

"Oh, perfectly! Now." He held out his hand, and the next moment I was on my old favourite's back.

It did not take Rufus a moment to mount Ostentation and follow me, and presently we found ourselves in Piccadilly.

"I shall never forgive myself if anything happens to you," were Rufus's first words, as he eyed Cigarette with no very trustful gaze; "and she's such an uncertain brute, there's no knowing when she won't——"

"I know," I laughed: "make a ridge of her back, and have you off. Yes, but she won't try that dodge on with me; she is a great deal too fond of me."

Just as we turned into Regent Street, Rufus uttered an exclamation of vexation.

"Oh, confound it, there's the victoria! I hope the mater won't come out just now."

But, just as he spoke, Mrs. Sandys, followed by James, with his arms full of parcels, came out of the shop. I laughed, and pulled up, and Rufus, with a cross, red face, was obliged to follow my example. Mrs. Sandys looked incredulous for one moment; then she raised her eyes to her son's embarrassed face.

"It's all right, mother," I said, hastily. "This is my own old mare; she was stolen from us last year in Rome, and father was too ill to attempt to trace her. I have ridden her hundreds of times; she is quite safe."

"My dear child, she is, without exception, the worst-tempered animal in London."

"Pet," I said, bending forward in my saddle, "Cigarette, old woman, will you play any tricks with your missis?"

Cigarette pricked her ears, and performed a little dance on her own account, which had the effect of turning Mrs. Sandys's face to an ashy paleness. I could not help laughing, though I saw that she was terribly frightened.

"Don't be afraid for me," I said, lightly; "she could not throw me if she tried, and she won't do that."

"She has thrown Rufus more than once."

"Oh, Rufus cannot ride!" I said, with delightful candour. "And, after my light hand, it is not likely she will bear his heavy one, if she can possibly get rid of it. Good-bye, and don't be frightened."

But she did look horribly frightened, all the same. I glanced back once, to see that she was still standing gazing anxiously after us. I waved my hand to her, and at the same moment was very nearly run down by a lumbering omnibus, so I did not dare to look aside again.

"What's the matter, Rufus?" I asked, as we turned into the Park.

"I knew the mater would bully me for letting you ride that brute," he returned, in a vexed tone.

"But it was not your fault."

"I dare say not; but she is always ready to blame me for all that goes wrong."

"Poor Rufus!" I said, pityingly. "I'll tell her it was all my fault when we get home. It is hard, though, that you can never please her; and I say, Rufus,"—here I edged Cigarette a little nearer to him,—“you won't be jealous of me, will you?"

"Oh, by Jove, no!" he answered, breaking into a laugh at the suggestion. "Besides, you know, she has not the same reason for disliking you as she has me. She and my father were not 'cousins.'"

"Did they quarrel?" I asked.

"Never,—oh, no! I believe that he always, from the first time he saw her to the very end, absolutely worshipped the ground she walked upon, and she simply hated him."

"Not really?" I exclaimed.

"Really; so, don't you see, there is no reason that she should not like you."

I wondered what he would say if he knew all.

When we reached home again, Mrs. Sandys came anxiously to meet us.

"No bones broken," she said, in a tone of relief.

"Oh, dear, no!" I cried, lightly. "And I have enjoyed my ride so much."

"I am glad of it, dear. Perhaps the next time you go I shall not be so thoroughly uneasy; but to-day I have been in perfect misery, dreading every moment lest I should see you carried in frightfully injured."

"My dear mother," I cried, "you need never worry about me, so long as I am on a horse. I don't think I require any of Rufus's instruction; indeed, I should say I know rather more about riding than he does. Why, I have ridden all my life,—ever since I was three years old. I first learned to ride in a circus, then in a military riding-school, and in some of the best private riding-schools in Europe. I don't generally make a proclamation of all this, you know, only as you seem so frightened for me I think it best to set your mind at rest."

"I have offered the mare to Nell," said Rufus, "but she won't hear of it."

"You would like her?" she said, turning to me.

"Very much; but I cannot rob Rufus of her," I answered. "I might buy her of you, if you wish to sell her at any time."

"What did you give, Rufus?"

"Two seventy."

"Then I will buy her of you," she said.

"But you would be afraid to ride, her," I exclaimed.

"To ride her! I would not trust myself on her back for two seconds. I should be a dead woman the third," she replied, with a shudder. "No, if I buy her of Rufus, it would be to give her to you."

"But why not let me buy her?" I asked, forgetting altogether to thank her for such generosity.

"Because I should like to give her to you," she said, kindly.

"That is very good of you," I said, gratefully; and then I looked at Rufus to see how he was taking all this. And Rufus said at once:

"Then her ownership is settled, and she belongs to you now, Nell. Did you tell me that your father bought her in Rome?"

"No; we lost her there. He never bought her at all; Prince Ferrari gave her to me."

"Oh, I see."

"Who is he, Nell?" asked Mrs. Sandys, with sudden interest.

"Prince Ferrari?" I answered. "Oh, he was very fond of me. He was once a great friend of my mother's."

"And he loved you for her sake?"

"Yes. He married an English lady afterwards; but she was not of an illustrious family, though immensely rich; a merchant princess, Prince Ferrari used to call her. She died about two years ago of Roman fever. It was just before her death that he gave Cigarette to me."

"I see. Then he was about your father's age?"

"Oh, younger, a good deal," I answered. "Fifteen years at least; he was younger than my mother even. Princess Ferrari was six-and-twenty."

"He will be glad to hear you have got his gift back again. I think I should write and tell him, Nell."

"Yes, I will."

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## CHAPTER VIII

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### "MY OLD FRIEND, PRINCE FERRARI"

ALL the same, I did not write to Prince Ferrari at all, for the following morning, when Rufus and I were riding slowly in the Park, I saw him standing by the rails, talking with several other men.

"Why, there is Prince Ferrari!" I exclaimed.

"Where?" asked Rufus.

"By the rails there, talking to three gentlemen. I wonder what has brought him to London?"

Although his back was turned towards us, I was not going to pass him without recognition. I checked Cigarette when we reached him.

"Prince," I said, "Prince."

He turned round in surprise; but the surprise quickly changed to delight as he recognized me.

"Nell!" he said, delightedly. "And on Cigarette, too! Why, whence have you sprung?"

"I am living here now," I said, simply. I dared not trust myself to say very much, and I could see by his face that he knew. "And when I got here I found Cigarette, under the alias of Taglioni, with Mr. Rufus Sandys for owner."

"Poor old Cigarette," he said, stroking her neck. "And where are you staying, Nell?"

"With Mrs. Sandys, my guardian," I answered.

"This is her son, Mr. Rufus Sandys. Rufus, this is Prince Ferrari."

The two men saluted each other, and a quick gleam flashed into Prince Ferrari's eyes—whether of anger or surprise I could not tell. It suddenly occurred to me that it might not be correct etiquette to have introduced them in the Park; but I wanted to talk to my old friend, and it would have looked stupid to have Rufus sitting there waiting. Any way, whether wrong or not, Prince Ferrari took advantage of my example to present his three friends to me; though not without sundry hints from them, which I was not slow to perceive. They seemed to know Rufus,—I suppose all the men of a certain set do know one another more or less,—and had already bestowed on him the little nod which seems to be the utmost courtesy English gentlemen ever show to one another. I wondered not a little how, when they do such a small amount of bowing, they manage to keep themselves in such good practice; for certainly the three bows I received were irreproachable.

"Allow me to introduce Lord Maurice de Vonne," said Prince Ferrari, politely.

Lord Maurice de Vonne uncovered his head, displaying a mass of curly blond hair, parted most beautifully in the middle. Before I had time sufficiently to admire him, Prince Ferrari's voice recalled me to a sense of my duty, which was to bow again, this time to Colonel Connistoun. He too was fair, but of a freckled, sandy fairness, so I supposed that he was a Scotchman. Then I had only one more bow to make, and that was for Mr. De Crespigny. I did not take much interest in him, for he was very young, and much association with my father and Prince Ferrari had made me think little of very young men.

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"How long do you remain in town?" Lord Maurice asked.

"I believe about a fortnight," I answered; "do we not, Rufus?"

"I believe so."

"And then you will be going to Hutton Royal," he continued. "A lovely old place, is it not?"

"I never was there," I replied.

"Really?"

"No. I was never in England until two days ago," I said, laughing. "Everything is quite strange to me."

"I should think so. You have lived in Italy, then?"

"I suppose so," I answered, looking doubtfully at Prince Ferrari. "I hardly think we *lived* anywhere; did we, Prince?"

"No," he said, laughing. "You certainly knocked about a good deal."

"We were like Arabs," I said, "here a week, and there a month, just as long as the sunshine lasted. How does the Villa Ferrari look now, Prince?"

"Just the same."

"Is the carving of the oak chamber finished?"

"Yes, and I have had the chapel entirely restored; it looks perfect now."

All this time the Prince was stroking Cigarette's satin-smooth neck, while Lord Maurice was looking at me with a sort of expression I have sometimes seen in the eyes of a dog, half wistful, half glad. They were beautiful eyes, soft and brown as those of a pure Skye, and contrasted strangely with his flaxen hair. He was a wonderfully handsome man, but I glanced from him to Prince Ferrari with a certain sense of relief. Yesterday I said that Rufus was one of the handsomest men I had ever seen,

excepting my father; I had forgotten Prince Ferrari. He was quite different from any of the others, though he too was fair of complexion. Never did I see such imperious blue eyes as his, such perfect features, such vivid beauty of colouring, such hair of red, red gold. He was taller, too, by half a head, than any of his companions; and he had a charm that none of the others could ever possess—he was my father's greatest friend.

"You will come and see me?" I said, suddenly, feeling that he would want to hear the whole sad story, which I could not tell him there.

"Of course. Where does Mrs. Sandys live?"

"In Park Lane." I told him the number of the house, and then I went on speaking of Cigarette, and how Mrs. Sandys had bought her of Rufus and had given her back to me.

"By the bye, did you say 'Miss Ferrers'? I did not catch the name before," said Lord Maurice presently, with a little apologetic bow to me.

"Yes, my name is Ferrers," I said, quietly. "Do you think we have met before?"

"Oh, no. I think not. But I met a man at Antwerp the other day who got me to witness his will; not before time either, I should say, poor chap. His name was Ferrers. Fane Ferrers."

For the first time in my life I wished myself off Cigarette's back. The suddenness of his words almost took my breath away. I sat quite still for a moment, looking at nothing. I was aware of a sharp, ugly word which slipped from between Rufus Sandys's teeth, and of a longer and more ugly Italian expression which found its way out of Prince Ferrari's mouth; then I felt the stinging blood coursing over my face, and, not being

minded to make a scene, I turned Cigarette sharply round, and let her tear away down the Row, with Rufus clattering after me.

At first Madam Cigarette thought we were in for a tearing gallop, and behaved accordingly; so, by the time I could get her pulled up into a respectable pace, the threatened fit of weeping had passed. I looked round, and encountered Rufus Sandys's concerned blue eyes.

"Nell, dear, I'm so sorry," he said, just as he might do if it had been his fault.

"Never mind," I answered, as bravely as I could, though my lips were trembling still. "I shall have to get used to these allusions; so the sooner the better."

"Idiot!" he said, savagely.

As we rode slowly back again, we passed the four men. A sudden impulse made me stop, as I caught sight of Lord Maurice's woe-begone face. I knew that was what dear father would have bidden me do.

"Oh, Miss Ferrers, I am so sorry!" he exclaimed. "Indeed I had not the least idea——"

"Please don't say any more about it," I answered, holding out my left hand, which was the nearest to him; "only it was so sudden." I gave them all a nod, and we passed on, but not before I had caught the murmur of approbation which escaped the lips of the three Englishmen, and seen the pleased light in the violet eyes of the Italian.

"Nell, you are a darling," said Rufus, at my elbow.

That afternoon Prince Ferrari called on me, and as there were several other people in the room, he was able, after five minutes' chat with Mrs. Sandys, to make his way to my window-seat.

"My little Nell," he said kindly. "I see that you have lost none of your old courage or your old courtesy."

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"No?" I could not find words to say more.

"I mean that which happened this morning. Nine women out of ten would have made a scene; but not one of a thousand would have come back and behaved as you did. You have made a slave of Maurice de Vonne for ever."

"I knew father would not have been pleased if I had gone away without speaking to him," I said, simply; "but I don't know if it was quite correct etiquette to stop again."

"Never stop to consult etiquette, child," he said, impressively; "follow the dictates of your own heart, and it will never lead you very far wrong,—your own heart,—and what you remember *he* would have liked. And now tell me all about your loss."

I told him the whole story, even about the lady who had put the wreath into my hand.

"Do you think you can be happy here in England, Nell?" he asked, gravely.

"Not so happy as I was," I answered, quickly; "but they are very kind to me. And in no place on earth can life be quite what it used to be."

"Then I am quite content for you," he said, smiling. "If I thought my dear little friend was unhappy, it would make me unhappy too. Now my heart is at rest."

And yet he sighed, as if it were not really true. I wondered what him sigh.

It was not very long before the other people took their departure, and then Mrs. Sandys was able to pay more attention to my father's friend.

"Nell was going to write to you, Prince," she said, looking at him with admiring eyes. "Was it not a curious meeting between her and Cigarette?"

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"Very," he answered; "and Nell is so pleased to have her back."

"Yes; I wanted to ask you, though, Prince, do you consider her a safe animal?"

"Certainly."

"She has thrown my son more than once."

"That is very probable. Nell here"—laying his hand upon my shoulder—"is a very fine horsewoman. I doubt if any horse could throw her. I am sure that Cigarette will never try."

"I am glad of that. I would not trust myself on her for untold gold; but then I am not a fine horsewoman by any means. Nell, I had no idea that you were. Oh, you may laugh! But what do you think, Prince? She told me she could ride a little."

Prince Ferrari smiled, and again I saw the light betokening approval come into his eyes. I remembered once hearing him say that a modest woman is a rare jewel. The hand which was still on my shoulder pressed it caressingly, and that from him, I knew, meant a great deal.

Just then the door was opened, and another of my new friends, Lord Maurice de Vonne, came in. He and Mrs. Sandys greeted each other like very old and very dear friends. She turned to introduce him to me, but I held out my hand and told her that Lord Maurice and I were already acquainted.

"Really; where did you meet?"

"In the Park, this morning," I replied. "Prince Ferrari introduced us."

Lord Maurice followed Mrs. Sandys back to the tea-table, while Prince Ferrari and I remained at the window. I could see, by the way in which she every now and again looked at me and by the earnest manner in which he was

speaking, that he was telling her all about his mistake of the morning.

"Prince," I said, suddenly, "do you remain long in England?"

"I can hardly say," he answered. "My business may keep me here some weeks. Not that I object to being kept; I like England, and I have no particular attraction elsewhere."

How very strange! Surely I remember having heard him say at least a hundred times that he detested England. He even used to let the Princess come alone to visit her people, he hated it so. What could have made him change so completely? For a moment I was puzzled, and then a light broke in upon the mystery. Of course, the Princess Ferrari was of a much less illustrious family than his own, and he had never cared to see much of her people,—of course, that was it.

"You knew my mother, did you not?" I asked, abruptly.

"Yes." His violet eyes looked straight into mine, but there was neither flinching nor confusion in them.

"What was she like?"

"A very beautiful woman."

"Yes; that was what father always said, if I asked him. The only time that I ever heard him describe her at all, he said she was something like Mrs. Sandys."

He looked quickly at the fair face bending over the tea-table, and, after a careful scrutiny, shook his head.

"No, I see no resemblance. Your mother was very fair, certainly, and perhaps in actual outline was not so much unlike Mrs. Sandys; but there any likeness ends. She was less rich in colouring, less queenly, more womanly, gentler, very quiet, and she had dark eyes."

"Dark eyes," I echoed.

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"Dark eyes; not like yours, of course, for her hair and complexion were almost the fairest I ever saw. No, they were grey eyes; very large, with long, dark lashes and rather dark eyebrows; they had the appearance of dark eyes."

"How strange!" I murmured. "You were very fond of her, Prince?"

"Very. Every one was. She was a woman whom to have known was to make one better all one's life. She should have been called by your pretty English name, Charity."

"I wish I had a picture of her," I said, dreamily. "It seems so strange not to know what one's own mother was like. Father was always sorry he did not have her portrait painted; but then, as he said, he never expected she was going to die so very soon."

"I have a miniature of her," said Prince Ferrari, after a moment's hesitation.

"Have you, really? Oh, do let me see it! I suppose you haven't it with you in England?"

"Yes, it is in my dressing-case, where it has been ever since I first had it. I will give it to you, Nell; but you must let me have a copy made of it first."

My first impression was of delighted gratitude, and then I remembered that if he had kept it for sixteen years or more it would not be generous to deprive him of it now.

"If you will have it copied for me, I shall be quite content with that," I told him. "I could not think of taking the miniature itself, even though it is my own mother's portrait."

"My little friend," he said, just touching my fingers with his own gloved ones, "you have the truest courtesy

and the finest grace I ever knew. You shall be no loser because you have chosen the copy instead of the original. I offered it to you because it is natural for you to wish to possess a portrait of your mother, but I will not disguise from you that the parting with it would have caused me a great pang. You know, child, in my young days I loved your mother as boys do sometimes love a pure, high-bred woman. Well, I was very young then, less than her own age, and it was natural that she never thought of me, except, perhaps, as a pleasant boy; it was natural, too, that she should give her love to Fane Ferrers. I do not suppose she ever knew how I cared for her; but your father did, and after their betrothal he said to me, 'I know how much you think about Cherry, but, believe me, she would never have cared for you. I did not intend to cut you out; but you see how it is, and she must have her way.' And so, I believe, she had until her death. I saw much, very much of them both, and the friendship did me good during my whole life. I dare say it was hardly the correct thing to do. I ought to have been at daggers drawn with your father, and have said all manner of unkind things to poor Cherry; but you know, Nell, how little he or I ever thought of the proprieties."

"The night before he died," I remarked, in a low tone, "he said to me, 'Always keep true, always be honest, keep your honour untarnished, and do what your heart tells you is right.' And so I try to," I added.

"I know it," he answered. "I have seen it thrice this very day; and, my little Nell, I honour you for it."

There was a moment's silence, and then I asked him how he came to have a miniature of my mother.

"Quite by accident," he replied. "Just after her death, I met by chance a rather celebrated miniature-

painter,—he has grown in fame greatly since then. He had met your mother some few months before either your father or I knew her. He had been struck with her face, and took the miniature without her knowledge, for the pleasure of reproducing the features and the colouring. I was in his studio, and saw it on a table, when he told me how he had come by it. I believe she had rather an objection to being taken at all, and had refused him a regular sitting. With a little persuasion he gave it to me; but, somehow, I always shrunk from showing it to your father."

"Prince," I said, impressively, "it is very kind of you to give me a copy, to say nothing of offering me the original."

"Nell," he said, gravely, "all your life you have been used to calling me Luigi; why have I grown into Prince?"

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## CHAPTER IX

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### CATCH WHO CATCH CAN

It was six o'clock when Prince Ferrari and Lord Maurice took their departure, and as soon as the door had closed behind them, my adopted mother came across the room and kissed me.

"You are Fane Ferrers's own daughter, Nell," she said, lovingly.

"Had you any doubt of it?" I asked, with an attempt at gaiety. "I should have thought I carried my parentage on my face."

"So you do, darling, and in your kind heart."

"Mind you don't spoil me," I laughed, awkwardly. "It is bad to hear one's self praised; my father very seldom did it."

"If I spoil you, Nell," she answered, "it will be because I cannot help it."

"But you seem able to help spoiling Rufus," I said, taking my courage in both hands and speaking just what was in my mind. "It isn't fair to make any difference between us."

"Have you constituted yourself his champion already?" she asked, smiling. "Well, my dear, I have to go to a meeting at Norcott House. Do you care to go with me? I warn you it will be very dull."

I owned to feeling a little tired. "And I should like an hour's music," I added.

So she went away, and I opened the piano gladly. I needed no notes, but played dreamily on. I was thinking about my meeting with Prince Ferrari,—about my mother, whom I had never seen. I used to think that when I meet her up in Heaven I should not know her, and how sad that would be; but now that Prince Ferrari was going to give me her portrait, I felt that I should know her in a moment. Then Rufus came in with a rush, and I awoke out of my day-dreams with a start.

"All alone!" he remarked.

"Yes. Your mother has gone to a meeting, at Something House," I answered.

"What have you been doing with yourself this afternoon?" he asked, pushing an easy-chair close to the piano.

"Shops and dressmakers," I answered; "no end of them. And then a number of people came to tea, amongst them, Prince Ferrari and Lord Maurice de Vonne."

"Oh, they came, did they? And what did they say?"

"They said very little. Prince Ferrari had, of course, a good deal to say to me; but Lord Maurice said all he had to say to your mother."

"Oh, he's a great chum of the mater's. You'll be immensely amused, Nell. There are about fifty fellows all just as intimate with her as Maurice de Vonne is."

"I suppose it's because she is so handsome," I remarked.

"Doubtless," he rejoined. "Sing something, Nell; there's a good girl."

I sang one song, of which the words are Tennyson's,—

"Bright and fierce and fickle is the South,  
And dark and true and tender is the North."

"It is a libel on the South, Rufus," I said, leaning back in my chair and striking idle chords with one hand.

"No, it is true," he affirms. "Where do you ever find such honour as in an Englishman?"

I was silent. It came rushing to my mind that perhaps it is only English women who have such strange ideas of fidelity.

"It's like this, Nell," said Rufus: "there are good and bad of both sorts, North and South alike, and it's not fair to take individual instances and judge the whole by them."

"I dare say you are right," I returned; and then, whilst I played, my thoughts wandered off again.

"Sing something," said Rufus, impatiently; "that is, if it won't tire you."

"Oh, dear, no!" I answered, and I broke into the first song that entered my head.

"I say, Nell," he said presently, opening his eyes and staring at me, "how did you learn to sing love-songs like that? Pray, have you ever been in love?"

I shook my head.

"No; my sorrows of that kind are to come. Have you?"

"Scores of times, only I never got my heart even cracked."

"And who were they?"

"Well," he replied, with modest pride, "the earliest I ever remember was the Lord Mayor's daughter."

"Goodness!" I exclaimed.

"Yes; her father was Lord Mayor of London town, and I met her at one or two juvenile parties. Her name was Mabel, and she was such a pretty little girl. I never looked at anybody else for six months. I used to swear

Mabel should be Mrs. Sandys as soon as we were old enough, and I gave her a wedding-ring out of the matrimony-cake to seal the engagement. But, alas for the bright resolutions of youth, I met Mabel the other day, and had to call her Mrs. Haye and ask after the baby. It's a strange world, Nell."

"I believe some novelist has found that out," I remarked. "I fancy I read a book with that title not very long ago. And who was your next?"

"Oh, after Mabel, I went a little higher up in the social scale, and had a very heavy affair with Maurice de Vonne's sister. His father's estate joins Hutton Royal, you know."

"I did *not* know," I answered; "but never mind that, go on."

"At that time I was just eight years old, and, from my long affair with Mabel North, was quite a gilded youth. However, the very first time I saw Ethel de Vonne, I simply fell over head and ears in love with her."

"Is she anything like Maurice?" I asked.

"Yes, very much like him. She was a good deal younger than Mabel North; in fact she is only eighteen now, and is to be presented this season. I hear she has grown perfectly lovely."

"And how did that end?"

"Oh, the usual way. I went to school, and when I came home, Ethel was abroad with her mother, and so I never saw her again. How is it that some poet describes it,—ah!—h'm! I can't remember it."

I sat laughing at his puzzled face until the tears stood in my eyes.

"Which poet?" I asked, teasingly.

"Ugh! I had it on the tip of my tongue a moment ago, but you've put it out of my head," he replied, crossly.

I put my two forefingers in the form of a cross, and held them just in front of his nose.

"Do you see that, Mr. Rufus Sandys?" I demanded.

He tried to seize my fingers, but I kept them out of his reach, and laughingly continued.

"And did you ever hear of any one being as cross as two sticks, pray?" I cried. "For, if you never have, I can show you a perfect specimen of the genus at this moment."

"What a tease you are, Nell!" he exclaimed. "I should have told you the quotation in a moment, only you put it out of my head. I will find it, though."

He jumped up and hastily turned over the various books which were lying on a table near to us; then selecting one, he opened it at the index, and quickly ran his forefinger down the page.

"What an elegant way of making a poetical quotation!" I remarked.

"Here it is," he cried, triumphantly. "Page eighteen. Now, Madam Quiz." Then he read aloud,—

"Two children in two neighbour villages,  
Playing mad pranks along the healthy leas;  
Two strangers meeting at a festival;  
Two lovers whispering by an orchard wall;  
Two lives bound fast in one with golden ease;  
Two graves grass-green beside a grey church tower,  
Washed with still rains and daisy blossomed;  
Two children in one hamlet born and bred;  
So runs the round of life from hour to hour."

Rufus dropped the book and returned to his chair, sinking into it lazily.

"Now do you not see?" he said, lifting his bright eyes to my face.

"My friend Rufus," I said, seriously, "will you take my advice?"

"Certainly, if it is good."

"It is for your good. Never again allow yourself to be drawn into making quotations; they are not your *forte*. Quotations, like puns, should be purely spontaneous; they should be given on the spur of the moment, or they become flat, something like champagne which has stood with the cork out. Don't you know that there is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads to fortune? Well, there is a tide of opportunities of conversation, which, taken at its flood, leads on to witticism or elegant converse, but which, if you should happen to miss the flood, as you did just now, only makes you look rather foolish and——"

But Rufus waited to hear no more. I saw what was coming, and dodged cleverly round the other side of the grand piano. It was very conveniently placed for my side, for my slim person was able to slide between it and the wall with the utmost ease, whilst my pursuer's bulky frame was inclined to stick fast. The game went on very nicely for a while, but, not being very strong, after ten minutes of eager watching on my part, and wild rushes on his, I was almost tired out.

"*Pax*, Rufus!" I panted.

"Just let me catch you," he returned.

"Oh, dear!" I sighed, dodging to the other end of the instrument, as he advanced round the opposite side. "I feel more like a speculator watching the rise and fall of the money market than like Nell Ferrers. Oh, Nell dear, but you've got yourself into a pretty mess this time."

"There is no doubt about that," remarked Rufus, grimly.

Finding that I was not inclined to give myself up, he, being of a lazy turn, sat down on the arm of a chair that he might the more comfortably keep me in durance vile. I speculated as to whether I could get out of the room, if I made a rush for it. The idea grew upon me; it was very unpleasant behind the piano. I wondered what Rufus would do if he caught me. I wondered, and then I made one heroic effort, and went flying across the room with long-legged Rufus at my heels. I got the door open, and tried to slam it after me, but his foot was between it and the door-post, and I pulled at the handle in vain. Having collected my very much scattered breath, I loosed my hold of the handle, made another rush, this time in the direction of the stairs, and ran head-first into Mrs. Sandys.

"What is the matter?" she gasped, when she had recovered from the shock of our collision.

For a moment Rufus stood still on the threshold of the drawing-room, looking remarkably foolish; then he fairly turned tail and bolted upstairs, leaving me leaning against a table, laughing until I was positively in pain.

It is wonderful how infectious laughter is; presently the surprise on Mrs. Sandys face relaxed, and she began to laugh also. Then I saw Charles's solemn countenance give way, and he was obliged to beat a hasty retreat. That set me off again, and I laughed on, more heartily than ever.

"What is it, Nell?" she asked, when she was able to speak.

"Oh, nothing much. Rufus and I have been quoting

poetry one against the other, and, as his did not fit,—in fact, was altogether *mal-à-propos*,—I've been chaffing him."

"And didn't Rufus take his chaffing kindly?"

"I thought so; but I suppose the trodden worm will turn, and he turned upon me with a suddenness which only just gave me time to get behind the entrenchment of the piano. We've been dodging each other round that piano for twenty minutes at least, until I got tired of it, and gathered up all my energies for a last sortie, a sort of forlorn hope."

"You amusing child," she said, with a laugh.

"Amusing," I echoed. "Ah, I dare say you would have thought so if you had seen me jiggling round that piano. But one may have too much of even a good thing."

I went upstairs slowly, one step at a time, like a very feeble person, for I was tired with my romp and my laughter. Then, to my horror, as I passed down the corridor leading to my room, a door opened and Rufus appeared.

"*Pax*," I cried, feebly. "*Pax*, Rufus, *Pax*!"

"I say, I didn't hurt you, did I?" he asked, anxiously, seeing me lean against the wall quite exhausted.

"Not a bit; but I am so tired," I answered, laughing anew at his concerned face. "My dear Rufus, I am not made of sugar or salt, not even of Dresden china; I am more like good solid delf."

"That's a comfort," he said, heartily; then he took my hand, bent his head and kissed it before I guessed what he was after, looked at me in a shame-faced way for half an instant, and, retreating into his room, simply shut the door in my face.

I was so thoroughly astonished that I stayed leaning against the wall, staring at the prosaic-looking door in blank amazement. It was evidently a new idea to Rufus to kiss a woman's hand, but to me there was nothing very unusual about it. But how very much more gracefully Prince Ferrari would have done it.

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## CHAPTER X

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### WINIFRED DE LA MOTTE

WHEN I was dressed I went into the drawing-room, where I found Rufus alone, looking exceedingly glum. I walked up to the window and remarked that it was a lovely evening. Rufus agreed with me, and I further volunteered that the nights were closing in a little, to which palpable fact he likewise assented.

I drew a long breath, for this was getting dreadfully tiresome.

"Rufus, you must finish telling me your love-affairs," I said, by way of a beginning.

"Oh, I forget the others: the girl at the pastry-cook's at Eton; a ballet-girl, to whom I never spoke, at the Alhambra; a don's daughter at Oxford, and so on, right away down to the present time."

"Oh, then there is some one now!" I exclaimed. "Who is she?"

"No one you ever met," he answered, flushing darkly.

"How do you know I have never met her? I may have met many people that you know."

"I am sure you never met her."

"Is she nice?"

"Yes," he returned.

"Are you very fond of her?" I asked, not realising how rude a question it was.

"I think so."

"Think so! Why, don't you know? How strange! I could understand your not knowing the state of her feelings; but your own, why, it's absurd. Is she fond of you, Rufus?"

"I don't know."

Then Mrs. Sandys came in, and I ceased speaking.

"Well, have you two suspended hostilities?" she said, pleasantly.

"Oh, yes, we have made a regular treaty," I replied. "I say, Rufus, what would you have done if you had caught me?"

The same dark flush swept across his face, and he laughed a little nervously.

"Done with you?" he repeated, evasively. "Oh, I—I—why, I should have carried you the whole length of Piccadilly, baby-fashion."

"Ye gods!" I ejaculated. "What a merciful dispensation that I had *nous* enough to keep out of your way!"

"But you have me to thank for that," put in Mrs. Sandys. "Rufus would have captured you in another minute, and then you would have been in a nice plight; he would have had you at his mercy."

"Oh, he would have let me off," I laughed, "if I had begged prettily enough."

"That I would not," he said, sturdily; and he said it, too, as if he meant it. How vindictive! I remembered his mother telling father of his unbending obstinacy, and evidently the picture was not overdrawn.

After dinner Mrs. Sandys happened to go out of the room, and I reverted to the subject.

"Rufus," I asked, "are you a very obstinate person?"

"I don't think so; why?"

"Then you would have let me off this afternoon?"

"Certainly not. It was pure luck saved you."

"But you wouldn't really have carried me all down Piccadilly?" I cried.

"All down Piccadilly," he said, coolly.

"Bless me!" I exclaimed. "And is that a common fashion here?"

"Well, no; I can't say it is."

"Then I don't believe it," I cried, triumphantly; "for I'll never believe you would have sufficient courage to do it."

"Nell, my dear," he remarked, quietly. "I should seriously advise you not to try my patience too far. You will not find escape so easy with those half-dozen yards of silk behind you."

I glanced at the train of my gown, and for once allowed discretion to prove the better part of valour; so for the rest of the evening our intercourse was of the most amicable nature.

The following morning when we—that is, Rufus and I—went into the Park, we found Prince Ferrari and Lord Maurice there before us.

I rode on in front with Luigi as being the most natural thing in the world, and heard from him that he was dining with us that evening.

"And so I shall hear some of your songs again," he ended, smiling.

"Has she asked Lord Maurice too?"

"Yes. Why? Do you want him?"

"I? Oh, no, not at all. But he is dreadfully fond of Mrs. Sandys."

"How do you know?"

"Rufus told me so. He put it that Lord Maurice was

a great chum of his mother's—like fifty others. Fancy having all those in love with her at once."

"Being great chums does not imply any love at all, my child," he said, laughing. "And this young Rufus, how do you and he get on?"

"Splendidly," I answered.

"Then he is in love with you already?"

"With me! My dear Luigi, what are you thinking of?" I demanded.

"Of young Rufus and you."

"But he is in love with somebody already," I said.

"He told me all about it last night."

"Who is she?"

"I do not know," I answered, carelessly. He says, not any one I ever met."

At this moment Prince Ferrari bowed to someone, and I looked up to see who was the recipient of his courtesy.

"Who is that?" I asked.

"Miss De la Motte."

"Oh!" The association attached to the name of De la Motte is so painful that for a moment I could not speak; then I looked up. "It was her mother who gave me the flowers?"

"I should think so. I believe she knew your father."

I looked at Miss De la Motte curiously when we passed her again. She was very beautiful, her face cold and clear-cut, perfectly faultless in feature, perfectly pale, perfectly soulless. I could not imagine it lighted up with a smile or flushed with anger; I should think her greatest display of temper would be no more than a sneer or a glance of cold contempt. The kind of woman who would go to the scaffold with the same easy grace that would carry her before her Queen; a woman who would listen

to the fierce revilings of a republican mob in utter silence, too proud even to be scornful. And yet, though it is a beautiful face, a proud face, I did not like it.

"Prince," I said, suddenly, "do you like her?"

"Who?"

"Miss De la Motte," I answered.

He elevated his eyebrows a little.

"I hardly know how to answer you. I admire her, certainly."

"But do you like her?"

"I think not. I do not like her character."

"And what is that?"

"A flirt."

"A flirt!" I echoed. "Why, I shouldn't have thought she had soul enough for that."

"My dear child," he answered, laughing, "you are a very innocent and a very ignorant young woman. It is due most probably to your peculiar bringing up and to the class of Bohemians among whom you have been thrown. In your world flirtation is almost an unknown thing."

"Yes; but what is it?" I asked, impatiently.

"It is to seem as hot as fire, and to be as cold as ice. It is to have the power of drawing hearts to you, whilst your own remains unmoved. It is to be what men dread and fear, whilst they follow. It is to be as merciless as you are strong; to be as strong as you are cold, as cold as others are warm. That is a man's—most men's—idea of a flirt; and that is Winifred De la Motte to the life."

"What a wretch!" I said, with thoughtless candour.

"On the contrary, I believe she is a most charming woman. Not that I know it from experience. I never gave her the chance of fascinating me."

His tone made me pity Winifred De la Motte from that very moment.

"Mother," I said, as I went into the dining-room at lunch-time, "you remember Mrs. De la Motte?"

"Yes, dear."

"She is in town. We saw Miss De la Motte in the Park this morning."

"Then they are probably only passing through on their way to Scriven," she answered. "Geoffrey De la Motte is Winifred's brother, you know."

"I wish," I began, then suddenly stopped short, remembering that, after all, this was not my own house, nor my own mother.

"What do you wish, Nell? Would you like to go and see Mrs. De la Motte?"

"Oh, very much!" I replied, eagerly. "I do wish they were coming here this evening."

"We will see. After lunch we will go and call upon them, and, if they are not engaged, which is not very probable at this time of the year, we will ask them."

"Rufus," she said, while we were at luncheon, "we are going to call on Mrs. De la Motte. Will you come?"

"No, thank you, mother," he returned, hastily, and with a candour worthy of myself. "I don't like the lady."

"I don't see what that has to do with it."

"Perhaps not; but, if you will excuse me, I would rather not."

"You used to like her well enough."

"Never," he declared, emphatically. "Whenever I have been in contact with her, which, thank Heaven, has not been often, I have invariably played at the same game as her own."

"Conceited boy," she said; but she smiled as she spoke.

I was ready for our drive before she was, and coming downstairs, found Rufus still in the dining-room. He caught sight of my face as I peeped in at the door, and jumped up.

"Come into the drawing-room, Nell," he said; "I want to ask you something."

"Well?" I asked, as he shut the door.

"Will you do something for me?"

"If I can."

"That's a good girl. What I want is this, that you will never make a friend of Winifred De la Motte."

"Oh, Rufus!" I cried, reproachfully. "And Mrs. De la Motte was so kind to me when dear father died."

"My dear child, every one likes Mrs. De la Motte," he answered. "I was speaking of Winifred. It is for your good."

He looked so honest and so manly as he stood before me, that I would have granted him many a harder favour willingly.

"I will do anything you like, Rufus," I said, with the old inclination to break down and weep.

"Anything? I wish I dared believe that. Well, then, Nell, you will see as little of her as possible?"

"Yes, I will just be civil; will that please you?"

"Certainly. On no account let her become your friend, what she would call, and you would consider, your friend."

"Very well; I am afraid, though, Rufus, that your mother is going to ask them to dinner to-night."

"She is!"—dismayed.

"Well, you see," I said, humbly, "it was quite my fault."

I don't suppose she would ever have thought of such a thing, only I wanted to see Mrs. De la Motte and thank her for her kindness at Spa."

"Never mind, dear," he answered, kindly; "only don't ever admit Winifred De la Motte into your life if you can help it or by any means keep out her. Take my word for it, you will bitterly regret it if you do."

"Oh," I cried, laughing, "when Miss De la Motte makes herself obnoxious to me in any way, I will come to you for protection."

"You will—you promise?"

My laughter died away and I shivered,—why, I knew not, only that all this forewarning was very nearly akin to foreshadowing.

"I promise," I said, gravely; "but, still, I hope I shall not need to claim it."

"I hope not," he answered.

Then the door opened and Mrs. Sandys came in.

"Now, are you ready?" she asked, brightly. "I am afraid, my dear, that I have kept you an unconscionable time waiting for me."

"Oh, no. I did not find it long," I returned.

"That is right. Will you change your mind and come with us, Rufus?"

"I think not, thank you," he answered, politely. At which I laughed, and Mrs. Sandys told me I ought to persuade him.

"Oh, no, I am not going to persuade him to do what he does not like," I replied.

"But he ought to like going with you," she said, in a tone of remonstrance.

"No, no," I said, sturdily; for which Rufus cast a grateful glance at me.

He followed us out to the carriage and stood there bareheaded in the fierce sunlight, until we drove away.

"How very serious you looked when I came into the drawing-room just now," said Mrs. Sandys, as she opened her parasol.

"Yes, Rufus was giving me some advice."

"Advice! Really!"

"He does not like Miss De la Motte much, mother," I said.

"No? Ah, he is a curious being! If he once takes a dislike, he is never cured of it. He is a singularly obstinate young man," she said, carelessly. "I am sure it is a most providential circumstance that he did not take a dislike to you."

"That would have been most unfortunate," I remarked, quietly.

"Do you mean that ironically, Nell?" she asked. "Or would you really have been sorry?"

"I should really have been sorry," I answered. "They say that a prophet has no honour in his own country, and I think it must be true. I am sure you do not appreciate Rufus half as much as you ought to do."

"Dear child," she murmured, patting my arm. "I wonder why he dislikes Winifred De la Motte so intensely. I suppose she has snubbed him at some time or other."

"I fancy not," I answered, "for Prince Ferrari has just the same feeling for her; and I do not think, from the way she bowed to him, that she has ever snubbed him."

"Perhaps not. Well, here we are," she said, pleasantly, "so you will be able to judge for yourself."

The man who opened the door informed us that Mrs. De la Motte was at home; so we alighted and were shown

into a pretty drawing-room, all ablaze with bright flowers. In a moment Mrs. De la Motte came in and, having greeted us, began telling me how much she valued the photograph of my father which I had sent her. Then she told me how she had known him twenty years ago, "long before you, my dear, were even born."

Presently Mrs. Sandys asked if they were engaged for the evening.

"Well, no, we are not," she answered. "We had some thought of going to a theatre."

"Prince Ferrari and Maurice de Vonne are coming to dinner this evening," Mrs. Sandys told her, "and we shall be delighted if you and Winifred will join us. By the way, is Geoffrey in town?"

"Yes, he is here, too."

"If he can come, our number will be complete," said Mrs. Sandys. "I suppose you are only in town on your way to Scriven?"

"Only for a few days. Yes, we are going to Scriven on Monday or Tuesday."

"Here is Winifred," Mrs. De la Motte went on. "I did not expect her for an hour at least. Winifred, my love, here are Mrs. Sandys and Miss Ferrers."

Miss De la Motte, dressed in white, crossed the room slowly, just touched Mrs. Sandys's hand with hers, and extended the same courtesy to me. Unfortunately for both of us, I met her just half-way, but no farther, and the result was a mutual touch which the most imaginative person in the world could not construe into a hand-clasp. Her brother, who was behind her, was of a different calibre; he took my hand into his, and apparently tried how near to a jelly he could squeeze it. For a moment I think that the "touch" was preferable, then I

glanced up into his good-tempered, sunburnt face and forgave him.

"Mrs. Sandys has asked us all to dine with her this evening," Mrs. De la Motte told her daughter, "to meet Maurice de Vonne and Prince Ferrari."

"We shall be very glad," said Winifred, graciously; and then I knew what Rufus and Prince Ferrari meant, and why they both disliked her so. Her look of insolent triumph made my blood rise to boiling-point.

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## CHAPTER XI

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### I DO NOT QUITE UNDERSTAND

"MR. SANDYS has gone out, ma'am," said Charles the irreproachable, when he brought in the tea.

"Nell, my dear," remarked Mrs. Sandys, when he had left the room, "when I have had a cup of tea, I am going to lie down for an hour. If you are wise you will do the same."

"I am not tired," I answered; "I will stay here and finish that novel I was reading this morning."

"Very well."

When she had gone, I settled myself in the largest and cosiest chair in the cool and shady drawing-room and opened the book, but not half a page had I read before Rufus came in.

"Where is my mother?" he demanded.

"Lying down," I answered. "Is she very delicate, Rufus?"

"Delicate; I don't think so. Why?"

"Because she seems to lie down so much."

"Oh, ladies acquire that habit in the season," he laughed. "And, faith, if you were up three parts of the night, as a regular thing, too, and going from ten o'clock in the morning besides, you wouldn't be sorry to lie down whenever you had an hour to spare."

"Dear me," I remarked, innocently, "what a nuisance the season must be!"

"I think so; but people will have their amusement. Well, did you find the lovely Winifred at home?"

"Yes, and she is coming to dinner,—Mrs. De la Motte, her daughter, and Mr. Geoffrey."

"Oh, is Geoffrey in town? What did you think of him?"

I looked at my fingers doubtfully, and Rufus laughed.

"He favoured you with a hand-shake, did he? It is not one which is easily forgotten, is it? All the same, Geoffrey De la Motte is a downright good sort; in fact, one of the nicest fellows I know."

"Will you have a cup of tea, Rufus?" I said, suddenly. "I quite forgot to ask you earlier, but it is hot still."

"Thanks, yes. And how about the lovely Winifred?"

"Oh, Rufus," I said, "she was out when we went, but came in with her brother soon after, and when Mrs. De la Motte told her your mother had asked them to dinner, she looked so odd, you cannot imagine. Her mother said that it was to meet Prince Ferrari and Lord Maurice, and such a strange light came into her eyes, as if,—well, as if she had won a great triumph."

"Triumph in prospective," murmured Rufus.

"But over whom, Lord Maurice or Luigi?" I asked.

"Maurice or who?" he said, quickly.

"Luigi! Prince Ferrari, you know."

"Is his name Luigi?"—his voice had become very cold.

"No, I did not know it."

"His name is Francesco Luigi Ferrari," I told him.

"But I do not see what Miss De la Motte has to do with him. I am sure she need not triumph in prospect over him, for he cannot abide her."

"How do you know?"

"He told me so only this morning."

"But the lovely Winifred does not know that," said Rufus.

I was already in the drawing-room when the first of the dinner guests arrived. It was Prince Ferrari.

"Am I very early, Nell?" he asked, glancing at the clock, as he noticed the empty room,—empty save for my presence.

"I do not think so. Mrs. Sandys has been lying down; she was dreadfully tired and, perhaps, that has made her late. I dare say she will be here in a moment."

Then Mrs. Sandys came in, looking wonderfully well in her black evening gown.

How lovely she was, and how the eyes of all men lighted at her approach. Prince Ferrari evidently admired her, as every one else did.

"Lord Maurice de Vonne," announced Charles, scattering all my thoughts to the winds.

Lord Maurice was closely followed by Rufus, and I must own that these young Englishmen were a credit alike to their country and the mothers who bore them. Before Lord Maurice had crossed over to me, after quitting his hostess, the door opened again, and the De la Mottes were ushered in.

I never looked at them. I was too busy watching Luigi. That he would not be particularly pleased, I had quite made up my mind; but for the black cloud of intense disgust and anger which swept over his face I was altogether unprepared. It lasted but for a moment; as it came, it was gone, and he was once more the courteous gentleman with the red-gold hair and the deep blue eyes I was accustomed to see.

I moved forward, passing Lord Maurice, who looked perfectly bewildered and rather inclined to be fretful, to

greet them. Again I met the elder lady's kindly recognition and her daughter's "touch;" again my slim hand disappeared into Squire Geoffrey's, to emerge half crushed. I felt half inclined to shriek out loud, the pain was so great; then I looked at Rufus, with a smile. His face refreshed me. It seemed to me that he was the only one of the three men who was able to meet Miss De la Motte without some degree of confusion. He was looking straight at me and smiled as his eyes met mine; I smiled back at him, and then suddenly felt the laughter freezing on my mouth and in my eyes, for I glanced at Prince Ferrari, who was looking as black as a thundercloud. Indeed, I did not know he could look so black. But the worst part of all was that he, like Rufus, was looking straight at me.

"What is it?" I asked, edging up to him.

"Nothing." He tried to speak in his usual tone, but failed lamentably.

"But something has vexed you; you are angry," I persisted.

"Am I?"

I turned my head away indignantly; I did not think he could be so unkind. A month ago I don't suppose I should have cared very much about it, he might have been as cross and looked as black as he pleased, I should only have laughed at him. But now, now that I had been bereft of the greatest love which ever shone upon my life, I was reluctant to loosen my hold of the hearts which remained to me; and Prince Ferrari was the closest link to the happy past. But Rufus and Mrs. De la Motte had already left the room, followed by Winifred and Lord Maurice, and Squire Geoffrey was standing beside me, holding a large arm just on a level with my shoulder.

The arrangement of the table placed me between Mrs. Sandys and Squire Geoffrey, and exactly opposite to Prince Ferrari, who had Miss De la Motte on his left. I only looked at him once, just after the soup had been served, and then he was bending down to hear some remark of Miss De la Motte's, and never saw me. Not that I wanted him to see me.

On Miss De la Motte's other hand was Lord Maurice de Vonne, who would, I fancy, infinitely have preferred being anywhere else. Rufus, too, appeared rather dissatisfied; but when he saw me looking his way, he smiled, and so seemed happier.

After this I devoted myself almost entirely to my dinner, partly because I had so little to distract me from it, for Mr. De la Motte's appetite was about as hearty as the clasp of his hand, and the conversation with which he entertained me between the courses was of a description hardly calculated to entertain me at all. I knew nothing of English sport, and he promptly told me that the Roman hunt was very tame and unenjoyable compared with English fox-hunting. I knew nothing at all about short-horns or fat pigs; and as to crops—why, I should not have known "t'other from which" when I saw them growing. He informed me that his Duchess of York the Third had won the first prize at the Royal Agricultural Show last year. I imagined the Duchess of York was a cow, but was not very clear, and he gave me no time to ask. Also that his Berkshire pigs were a perfect picture, and that if a day or two of good, soft, soaking rain would come it would do an immense amount of good to the crops. It was all Dutch to me and I was bored to extinction.

Apparently, Prince Ferrari was not bored as I was, for

the liquid murmur of his voice scarcely ceased, until Mrs. Sandys and Mrs. De la Motte rose to leave the room. I followed in the wake of Miss De la Motte and did not look at him. I rather dreaded the time which must elapse before the men came into the drawing-room, for I was mindful of what Rufus had said to me earlier in the day; and, moreover, I had no inclination whatever to talk to her.

However, she followed me to the window-seat, and settled herself in the corner opposite to mine.

"How nice it must be to live here instead of in a stupid square like ours," she remarked, graciously.

"Yes, it is very pleasant here," I answered.

"And then you will be going down to Hutton Royal directly," she continued. "It is such a lovely old place."

"So every one tells me," I replied. "I am rather curious to see an English country-house. I never did, you know."

"I suppose not. How strange it must be to come back to your own country and find everything quite strange to you! And yet it must be rather a pleasant sensation, too, if you do not happen to dislike your first impressions."

"Oh, I did not do that," I said, civilly. "My father did not care for England himself, but I find it and its people more pleasant than I expected. I always thought they were cold and dull, the English; that is the general idea of them on the Continent."

"Oh, foreigners are so absurdly impulsive," she returned, a little disdainfully; "though, to be sure, no typical Englishman could be colder than Prince Ferrari!"

"Cold!" I echoed. "Do you think so?"

"I cannot say I find him so myself; but in general society he is considered remarkably so. You know his

wife was an English woman, and they say that he was so unhappy in his marriage that he has vowed never to marry an English woman again."

The whole story was so absurd that I burst out laughing, at which she looked politely surprised. Just then the door opened and the gentlemen came in, followed by Charles and James bringing coffee.

That Miss De la Motte had no intention of remaining any longer in my out-of-the-way corner was soon evident, for she shivered slightly and glanced round at the open window.

"I think I had better move," she remarked, quite confidentially; "I feel the draught a little."

"I will close the window, if it annoys you," I answered.

"On no account, pray," she said, rising hastily; then she moved away into the centre of the room.

But none of the men seemed inclined to avail themselves of the vacant seat left on her sofa. Rufus came in my direction, but, unfortunately, was intercepted by Mr. De la Motte, who held him fast, not with his glittering eye, but with his very substantial hand. Lord Maurice took refuge with Mrs. Sandys, and Prince Ferrari, after a moment's hesitation, crossed the room to me.

"May I sit here, Nell?" he said, almost humbly.

"If you like," I answered, civilly, but no more, and taking my coffee from Charles as I spoke.

When the man had passed on, he said in a low tone,—

"What is the matter, Nell?"

"I do not know," I replied, icily. "I asked you the same question before dinner, and you said 'Nothing.' But you did not say it in any too polite a manner, Prince Ferrari," I ended, wrathfully.

"Was I rude?" he asked, in a tone of real surprise.

"I thought so," I answered, without raising my eyes from my cup; "and I thought you unkind, too."

"Nell!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, I did; I could not help your annoyance, whatever it was. If it was because Miss De la Motte was asked here, well, you have recovered from it, that is all."

"It had nothing to do with that," he said, eagerly.

"Oh!" My tone must have been very dubious, for he said,—

"I will tell you what it was."

"I do not wish to know," I interrupted, loftily.

"Nell, will you sing something for us?" inquired Rufus, at this moment.

I rose immediately, but I wished that I could have finished the quarrel. I should liked to have had it over and done with before singing. However, I turned to the piano with a reluctant sigh.

"What shall I sing?"

"Anything,—anything," said several voices at once.

After singing one song, I looked round; they were all occupied. Mrs. Sandys's lovely golden head was close to Mrs. De la Motte's grey one, and Lord Maurice's dark eyes were turning from one to the other in great amusement. Squire Geoffrey had captured Rufus once more, and this time seemed to have captured his interest as well; on the hitherto vacant half of Miss De la Motte's sofa sat Prince Ferrari; only I was alone.

The folding-doors into the smaller drawing-room were standing slightly open, so I slipped quietly away, out of the company of those who did not want me, and never missed me when I went. I stood at one of the windows, thinking how changed everything was; and so lost in thought was I, that I never heard the sound of a footfall

on the soft carpet, and did not know that I was no longer alone until a hand touched my cheek and I heard Prince Ferrari's voice murmuring in my ear.

"Will you forgive me, Nell?" he asked, in penitent tones. "I know I was horribly cross and rude, too, but I did not mean it for you."

"No?" Surely he must have heard the gladness in my voice. I could hear it myself.

"You know I did not mean so."

"I thought you did," I answered, flushing hotly; "though I could not understand it."

"No; how should you?" he said, tenderly. "Some day, my little Nell, you will understand it all better." And so we returned to the other drawing-room, friends once more, friends and yet not quite the same.

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## CHAPTER XII

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### "THAT GIRL"

A WEEK had gone by,—it was Rufus's last day, when he must go back to Colchester by the latest train.

"Rufus," I said, suddenly, during breakfast, "Hutton Royal is not so very far from Colchester, is it?"

"Twenty miles, or so," he answered. "Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I was only thinking," I answered.

"When will you take your long leave, Rufus?" asked his mother.

"I don't think I shall get it before Christmas," he said, speaking to her, but looking at me.

"For Christmas, do you think?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Where will you spend it? At Hutton Royal?"

"Sure, I can't say,"—with a laugh. "It will very much depend."

"Yes, upon that horrid girl," I thought, indignantly.

"You will ride this morning, Nell?" he asked, turning to me.

"Oh, yes, of course."

"Then shall we say eleven o'clock? Yes? I will be back in time."

"Where are you going?" asked his mother.

"I am going to have a coat 'tried on.' Is not that the phrase you ladies use? I have one or two other things to see about as well."

"I wonder," said Mrs. Sandys, when he had departed, "why he was so doubtful about spending his leave with us?"

"Oh, he didn't know where she would be," I answered, thoughtlessly.

"She? Who?"

"I quite forgot. Oh, it was nothing, only a joke we had the other day?" I stammered, utterly disregarding truth, and everything else, in my anxiety to shield Rufus.

"Then he has been making a confidant of you already," she said, coldly. "I think, my dear, he might have had better taste—to say the least of it."

"Don't be angry with him," I cried, tearfully. "Please do not; it does make me so miserable."

"Tell me, child," she said, in a changed tone, "have you grown to like my son?"

"Oh, yes, very, very much!" I answered, with emphasis. "And, indeed, I cannot bear to hear him always blamed. You won't say anything to him, will you?"

"Not if you do not wish it."

"Of course I do not," I said, fretfully; "what would he think of me if he knew. And yet I said it quite carelessly—quite unthinkingly—I am sure. But he would think me a mere telltale; and, oh, if we each were to repeat all the silly nonsense the other had said during the last fortnight, I fear you would think us just a pair of lunatics."

"I will not say a word," she replied, smiling.

"Thank you, thank you," I said, gratefully; and yet, even as I thanked her, I felt doubtful if I was doing father's bidding. Was I proving myself quite true, quite honest? I had a good mind to tell Rufus that I had told his mother about that girl.

“ Prince Ferrari seemed quite struck with Winifred De la Motte the other evening,” remarked Mrs. Sandys presently. “ Did you notice it, dear ? ”

“ Oh, yes, I noticed it,” I answered, honestly enough this time.

“ It would be a very good match for Winifred,” she continued. “ Of course, Geoffrey is very well off ; but when he marries they will find a great difference.”

“ Is he going to be married ? ” I asked, feeling utterly indifferent as to the reply.

“ Oh, dear, no ! But he might fall in love any day ; he is quite a young man still. Well, I am sure I hope Winifred and Prince Ferrari may make a match of it. She is a very handsome girl, but she has thrown away so many good chances, and she is not so young as she was.”

“ How old is she ? ” I asked.

“ Seven- or eight-and-twenty. Yes, it would be a very good match for Winifred.”

“ I do not think she will ever be Princess Ferrari,” I said, quietly.

“ Why not ? ”

“ Because he does not like her ; he told me so.”

“ Oh, my dear,”—with a little laugh,—“ you must never believe a man when he says that ! It is the surest sign that he does like her very much. I know the world, Nell.”

I was silent. I would not dispute the question, but all the knowledge of the world would not be enough to convince me that Prince Ferrari had much liking for Winifred De la Motte.

“ Is it true,” she asked presently, “ that he was very unhappy with his first wife ? ”

“ No,” I answered, emphatically ; “ that is one of Miss De la Motte’s fabrications.”

"Well, certainly I heard it from her," she frankly admitted.

"I knew it. I will tell you all I know about the Princess, mother. She was, as of course you know, an English lady."

"Yes."

"Well, the Ferrari family were very poor. Prince Ferrari had all his titles, all his honours, and miles and miles of pedigree, but he had no money."

"Poor fellow!" she murmured.

"Only an impoverished Florentine nobleman can be as poor as he was; but, then, he met an English lady in Rome, a Miss Newton, and, as she was enormously rich, he married her. I have told you before that her family was not illustrious, and I think she never quite forgot that he was a prince; she never could quite realise that he was her husband, and that by her marriage she had become his equal. Perhaps he would have loved her better if she had; but, you see, she did not, and so he was only very fond of her."

"Very fond of her?"

"Very. I don't mean to say that he was in love with her, but he was far too fond of her to wish to quarrel with her, and her death was a great grief to him."

"And was she happy?"

"Princess Ferrari? She worshipped him. I have seen her flush and brighten up when he spoke to her, or when he did any little thing for her; only she never was quite able to forget his rank—that was a pity."

"And she was quite young?"

"Six-and-twenty when she died. They had been married six or seven years. I forget which."

That morning Mrs. Sandys went out rather early and I

was left alone. Just as I was thinking that I must go to put on my habit, Rufus returned.

"Oh, Rufus," I cried, springing up, "I have something to tell you!"

"Yes? I hope it is something pleasant," he said, smiling.

"I am afraid not," I answered, dolefully. "I am afraid you'll be dreadfully vexed with me."

"Why, what is it?" he asked.

"Well, Rufus," I began, reluctantly. "Ah, I am so afraid you will be angry!"

"With you, Nell? It is impossible. Come, do tell me at once."

"It was about that girl, you know."

"Girl? What girl?"

"Why, that girl you are so fond of, to be sure," I replied. "Mrs. Sandys asked, or wondered, why you seemed so doubtful about spending your long leave with us, and I laughed and said,—oh, it was quite without thinking, I assure you, Rufus!—that it would depend upon that girl you're so fond of. And, oh, dear, she took up the words so sharply, and seemed so vexed, that I said it was only a joke between us!"

"You were quite right," he said, laughing. "And is that all? I was afraid it was something very much worse."

"But," I cried, "it was a positive untruth, and I am very unhappy about it."

"My dear, honest, little soul, it is as true as possible. It was only a joke. 'That girl' exists only in your fertile imagination."

"But did you not tell me that you thought you were in love with her?"

"I tell you now that I like you the best of any girl I ever knew," he said, in a teasing tone.

"Well, I am very glad," I said, with deepest relief. "I was afraid I had done great mischief. I must tell your mother."

"Do not," he said, hastily. "If she wishes to know the exact state of my feelings, let her ask me, and I will tell her myself."

"But, Rufus, you will spend your leave with us?"

"Would you like me to?"

"Of course I should. I am glad we are going down to Hutton Royal so soon, for I should hate riding in town with only a groom."

"But you've liked riding with me?" said Rufus.

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## CHAPTER XIII

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### I AM PUZZLED

RUFUS had gone, and, as I feared, it was wofully dull without him. Somehow, the breakfast-table did not look complete, and the morning drive with Mrs. Sandys was but a poor substitute for my daily ride.

It still wanted about half an hour to lunch-time when we got back from our drive, so while I had my hat on I went to the stables to see Cigarette, carrying the customary apples and sugar with me, while stately Bob walked at my heels.

As I pushed open the door leading into the yard, George, who, by the way, seemed to have taken a tremendous fancy to me, chiefly due, I believe, to my management of Cigarette, jumped off the block on which he was sitting, quietly polishing up a bit, and came to meet me.

"Morning, miss," he said, cheerfully. "Cigarette, she 'ave been a fretting orful at not going out."

"Have she?" I remarked, unconsciously. "Has she, I mean. Poor dear! Haven't you had her out at all?"

"Yes, miss, I took her out quite early."

"But you'll take her this afternoon," I said, anxiously.

"Yes, miss, I'll take yer directly after I've 'ad my dinner; but, Lor' bless yer, she knows the difference, she

do. She shot me orf, she did, last Toosday, and when I come 'ome she was a-standing at the stable door, she was."

I laughed, partly at Cigarette's tricks and partly at the way in which George told them; and then I went into the stable to see my bonny satin-skinned pet.

I was still patting and feeding her when George put his head in at the door,—the "dore," as he calls it.

"A gentleman, miss," he announced.

"Well, come in," I said, unceremoniously; "I haven't finished giving Cigarette her carrot and sugar yet."

I had really forgotten for a moment that Rufus was down at Colchester, until Prince Ferrari walked in.

"Oh, I had forgotten Rufus was gone!" I said, holding out my hand. "How are you? I haven't seen you for a week. I really began to think I was never going to see you any more."

"Would you have been sorry for that?" he asked, still keeping my two hands fast in his.

I was so surprised that I did not reply, but looked at him open-eyes; and then he laughed.

"Yes, I see you would have been. Well, dear, I had no intention of keeping away for half so long, but I have been busy; in fact, I have been away."

Again I said nothing. I happened to know that Winifred De la Motte had seen him every day.

"Why don't you speak, Nell?" he said presently.

I looked at him for one moment, wondering if some evil spirit had entered into my old friend and taken possession of him, and then—I don't quite know what came over me, but I hid my face against Cigarette's neck and broke into a torrent of tears. And then, somehow, I found myself in Prince Ferrari's arms, sobbing on his

breast, while his strong arms clasped me closely to him. Yes, there we stood, as utterly absurd and incongruous a picture as any two people ever made in this world. I, in a smart French hat and a long dress, sobbing violently, and Luigi, in frock coat, tall hat, and all the glory of clean gloves, endeavouring to comfort me, while for a background we had the stable fittings, and Cigarette, very impatient and fidgety, wondering what it all meant.

"What has troubled you, little girl?" he asked. "Did you really think I was never coming any more? Foolish little girl."

If he had omitted the last three words, I should have told him what was troubling me; but I was very proud and did not wish him to think me jealous.

But he was still holding me tightly and his violet eyes were looking straight into mine.

"Tell me what you see," he said, after a moment.

"I see you," I answered.

"And nothing else?"

I wrenched myself away impatiently.

"Yes, I see something else," I said, curtly.

"And will you tell me, little friend, if you like what you see there?"

I looked straight up into his eyes again—those imperious eyes, by whose truth I would have sworn.

"If any one told you a lie," I asked, quietly, so quietly that I marvelled at my own calmness, "what would you do?"

He started a little, as if my shot had struck home; not so, the next moment I was undeceived.

"Have you been telling me a lie?" he said, fiercely.

"I!" I returned, proudly. "Did ever you know me tell a lie?"

"Never. But what do you mean? To whom do you allude?"

"Some one I know," I said, steadily; "some one I love has told me a lie, an unnecessary lie, and I ask you what you would do in my place?"

"It would depend," he answered. "If you had lied to me, I should feel tempted to shoot you; if it were an indifferent person, I should keep out of his company in future."

"And suppose it were you?" I suggested.

"I hope, child," he answered, gravely, "that, if ever I tell you a lie, you will forgive me. Believe me, before I should be driven to that, I should, indeed, be in a terrible strait,—I should need all your pity, as well as all your forgiveness."

There was a sound of footsteps in the yard, and he turned for the first time to Cigarette. The intruder was James, the footman, who came straight in, to inform me solemnly that luncheon and Mrs. Sandys were awaiting us.

And so we returned to the house, silent save for one question from him.

"Will you ride with me this afternoon, Nell?"

"I think not," I answered, quietly.

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## CHAPTER XIV

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### THE MINIATURE

DURING the luncheon, which followed on my conversation with Prince Ferrari, he talked principally to Mrs. Sandys, both of them keeping up that light converse which always made me feel such an outsider: how Mrs. Johnnie This had ruined her husband for diamonds, and how Lady That had gone away and left hers, after having been frequently thrown downstairs or beaten within an inch of her life. Perhaps later on, I reflected, when I became acquainted with all these people, I too might come to join in the little stinging, scandal-flavoured histories which seem so delightful to men and women of fashion; but at that time I took no interest in them. I could not help thinking that if the retailers of gossip did but look at home and try to mend their own ways before they commented with such severity on the flaws and imperfections of their neighbours, the world would be all the better for it; but, then, as Prince Ferrari had said but a few days previously, I was a very innocent, ignorant young woman. And, after all, I was not sure that innocence is such a fine possession. I was more than doubtful about it, for it seemed to me that a certain degree of guilt is more comfortable. I am sure Prince Ferrari looked much more comfortable just then than I did.

"I assure you it's a fact," said Mrs. Sandys, confiden-

tially, "though, of course, I would not repeat it to everybody. But I had it from Nora O'Connor, who is Lady Lesley's second cousin by marriage, you know."

I had heard her tell the same story twice the previous day, each time with the same assurance, "I would not repeat it to everybody," and then I remembered that it was but yesterday morning that she told me that absurd story about Princess Ferrari.

Prince Ferrari's voice roused me from my thought.

"Dreaming, Nell?" he remarked.

"I was thinking about Rufus," I answered, promptly.

"I suppose you find it very dull without him?" he said, carelessly.

"Frightfully so," I answered, defiantly.

"You miss your ride, dear," murmured Mrs. Sandys, pityingly. "I dare say Prince Ferrari would be very glad to ride with you. I may be very foolish," she continued, turning to him, "but I am really afraid to trust her with only a groom, I am always so nervous myself in town."

"I have already asked Nell to ride this afternoon," he answered, "but she has declined."

"Oh, I will go if you like," I said. It was not my usual habit to cut off my nose in order to spite my face, and to deny myself the pleasure of a ride partook very much of that sort of thing.

"Of course I shall like it," he said, courteously.

"Very well," I rejoined. "Then, if you don't mind, mother, I will go and tell George not to take Cigarette out."

"Cannot James go?" she asked.

"Oh, I would rather go myself. I am always glad to have a peep at Cigarette."

I departed, running, and gave George his orders; then I came back, very much more slowly, but still light of heart. I began to feel more like myself again.

I went back into the dining-room, but it was deserted, and I found Prince Ferrari alone in the little drawing-room.

"Where is Mrs. Sandys?" I asked, as I closed the door behind me.

"A dressmaker came and she had to leave me," he answered. "Come here, Nell—I want you."

I approached him, but I looked at him steadily, all the same.

"Do you know," he said, taking my hand, "that you were very cross to me this morning? I want you to tell me the reason."

Now, I had firmly made up my mind that I would not tell him the reason, lest he should think me jealous and interfering, so I maintained discreet silence, and took to twisting the buttons of his coat with my disengaged hand.

"Well?" he said.

"I can't."

"I can't," he repeated, dryly; "that means that you won't. Very well, Nell."

Then he let go my hand, as if he had quite done with me. If I had had a good honest courage, I should have owned that I was cross; but I am not a courageous girl. So I kept on twisting one of the buttons of his coat, until I threatened to pull it off altogether. I fancy he thought so too, for he imprisoned my hands in his.

"Were you fretting for young Rufus?" he asked.

"No," I said, shaking my head.

"You are quite sure?"

"Well," I answered, honestly, looking up at him at last, "it is dreadfully dull without him, certainly, but fretting—no," shaking my head again, "I have not been fretting for him."

"Then you were vexed because I have not been here for so long?" he questioned. "I assure you, child, I could not come. I have been down in Lancas——"

"I don't want to hear," I cried, impatiently, for I did not wish to quarrel with him in downright earnest. "I don't want to know. I was cross this morning, rude, too, if you will, and you must forgive it. I have been peevish of late, and, indeed, I cannot help it. Perhaps I shall get used to being alone in the world after a while."

"You will not be always alone," he said, speaking in a lower tone. "You will be marrying some of these days."

"Marrying," I echoed. "Nonsense!"

"Mrs. Sandys would like you to marry her son," he said, gravely; "she told me so, just now."

"Rufus!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, Rufus. Why not? Would that not please you?"

I looked at him amazed for a moment.

"Why, he is a boy," I said, at last.

"A boy! What would you have,—an old man?"

"I am not going to marry him," I declared, "either to please Mrs. Sandys or any one else. Why, do you want me to marry him?"

"I!" he cried. "Do you think I want you to marry any one—but myself?"

The imperious blue eyes were tender enough now, and the perfect face bent down to mine was all alight with love.

"Why don't you speak to me?" he asked, drawing my

hands up to his breast; "why don't you say something? Are you vexed with me for loving you?"

"Loving me," I repeated, stupidly.

"Yes! Did you not know it all along?"

I shook my head, gazing at him in wonder.

"Could you not see, the other night, when you said I was cross, rude, too,—fancy me either with my darling,—did you not know why?"

"No," I said, rather blankly. For my life I could not tell why love should make one either cross or rude.

"I did not mean to tell you, darling. I meant to keep my secret a little longer, till you had learned your mind more fully, till you knew the world better; but, since my love makes me bearish to you, I can keep the secret no longer."

I said nothing. Surely I had lost the use of my tongue. But my limbs were trembling as with an ague and my eyes drooped before the passionate light in his.

"Can you not speak?" he asked, pressing my clay-cold hand in his firm grasp.

"I should hope so," I answered, laughing, "only it seemed to me that there was nothing to say."

"Could you not tell me you love me?" he asked, gently. "It is not difficult to say—if it is true."

I laughed. Oh, how light my heart felt. I, who yesterday—no, this very morning—was loveless, utterly bankrupt of love, was once more rich. I had once more a great love, all my own.

"You must never call me 'Princess,'" I said, joyously; "never anything but Nell."

"My Nell," he murmured,—“my little Nell!”

He rested his cheek against mine in silence; a silence which I broke.

"I say, Luigi," I remarked, "we must not have any more crossness, or anything else of that sort, must we?"

"Certainly not," raising his head and looking at me with well-satisfied eyes. "And I was cross the other night, darling, very cross; I own it; and yet I could not help it, it made me so mad to see that young oaf grinning at you in his self-satisfied way—at my Nell."

"Oh, that was it, was it?"

"Yes, that was it—now, won't you forgive me?"

"I think I did the other night," I said, gently.

"So you did, darling. And now, Nell, won't you tell me what this trouble was this morning?"

"I would rather not," I answered, looking at him, yet flushing a little, too. "I was vexed, but now I won't think of it any more. No, I won't think of it any more." I ended, resolutely.

"I suppose it had nothing to do with me, then," he said, carelessly; "and, since it was disagreeable, I won't have you vex yourself by repeating it. Nell, my darling, are you quite sure that you love me?"

"Quite sure," I returned, without hesitation.

"You won't be liking young Rufus after a while, and wishing you could marry him?"

"No," I answered, emphatically.

"And have you considered that I am nearly two-and-thirty, while you are only sixteen?"

"I shall be seventeen, next week," I replied. "And I have told you before that I do not like boys."

"But you like Rufus."

"Oh, how you do worry about Rufus!" I cried, impatiently. "Of course I like him. You have no idea how kind he has been to me."

"Confound him!" he ejaculated.

"By no means," I rejoined; "though, as to marrying him,—why, the idea never entered my head."

"You are very young, Nell," said Luigi.

"Very," I answered, cheerfully. "But then, you know, Luigi, I shall mend of that."

"It seems almost cruel," he went on, seriously, "to have spoken yet awhile."

"And would you have left me all alone among strangers in ignorance of it?" I asked, indignantly. "It would have been cruel."

"You do not understand," he said, a little wearily. "I only wish to be perfectly honest, perfectly fair to you. Just now you are very lonely, you are in trouble, and, knowing me so well, knowing the links which have bound me to you and yours in the past, you might tie yourself down to me and——"

"Well?" I put in, breathlessly.

"You might wake up some fine morning to find yourself loathing the chains which bind you to me; you might come to think that I had taken an unfair advantage of you in asking for your love and accepting your promises at a time when your heart was sore and empty and you were not old enough to know your own mind. I do not think I could bear that, dear."

"I shall never ask you to bear it," I answered. "I wonder what Mrs. Sandys will say?"

"Will you say nothing just yet to her?" he asked.

"You see, darling, she wishes you to marry this son of hers, and, legally, you cannot marry without her consent until you are of age. I must think it all over, and judge what will be my fairest and most honest course towards you. I had not intended to speak for a year, at least."

"But you could not help yourself," I said, triumphantly.

"I wonder who could? Nell, do you know what made me come after you this morning?"

"No."

"I wanted to give you this,"—drawing a morocco case out of his breast pocket. "It is the miniature I promised you."

I opened the case, and cried aloud in delight, for on the velvet cushion within was an oval miniature, some two inches in length, and a little less broad than long; it was set in silver, and had my initials, G. F., set in diamonds on the loop at the top, through which was passed a twisted chain of silver. I took it in my hand, but the tears shut out the face,—the face of the beautiful young mother whom I never knew, who gave her life for mine.

"If it makes you unhappy," said he, "I shall be sorry I brought it."

"Not unhappy," I whispered; "anything but that." And then, when the tears had passed, I examined it closely. Such a lovely face it was, such bright, smiling eyes, such a sweet mouth, such sunny, rippling hair. I kissed the portrait, and then, moved by a sudden impulse, I lifted my face to his.

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## CHAPTER XV

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### MY LOVER

It was just four o'clock when Prince Ferrari returned for our ride. I was sitting in Mrs. Sandys's dressing-room, already in my habit, and she, as usual at that hour, was resting.

"There he is," I said, jumping up.

"I need not go down, dear," she remarked, lazily. "I have to go and see Mrs. Lucy at five, so I shall be in long before you return. You may as well ask Prince Ferrari to dinner, Nell. He may be free and it is deadly dull alone.

"Very well," I answered, lightly. "Good-bye."

I bent down and kissed her, as she always liked me to do, and then I ran downstairs to where my lover was awaiting me. My lover! What a strange sound those two short words had.

I pushed the door open, and literally danced into the room. I was so happy I could not walk sedately. A sudden, swift joy lighted up his face, and then he, with me in his arms, kissed me.

"Of what is my darling thinking?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing I can tell you," I answered, laughing.

An impatient shadow flirted into his eyes.

"It seems to me," he said, you have many thoughts that you do not wish me to share."

"Oh, I will tell you," I cried, my happy laughter bub-

bling out again. "I was thinking—don't let it make you vain—that just as you stand there, with the sunlight falling upon your head, you are—well, not exactly ugly."

He laughed.

"If I please you I am more than vain," he said, "for I am quite content."

Please me! What a mild way of putting it! If I had spoken all that was in my mind, I should have told him that, to my eyes, he had the beauty of half the gods in the mythology.

"I wish I had hair like yours," I said, idly stroking it with my hand.

"You are very passable as you are," he answered, smiling.

"That was what father said," I cried, "only just before he died, you know. 'I like you very well as you are, child.' Do you remember his half-lazy, half-tender voice?"

"Yes," he said, simply. "Do you think he would have been pleased, Nell?"

"Yes," I answered. "I am sure of it. He would have liked any one whom I had chosen; provided, of course, that he was a gentleman; but, if he knew it were you, I am sure he would be delighted, Luigi. There is Cigarette. Isn't she bonny?"

"Nell," he said, suddenly, "suppose that at some time, at any time, something should come between us."

"Come between us," I echoed. "How?"

"Something that might part us," he answered. "Such things do happen some times, Nell. Would you mind much?"

"I should die," I said, unhesitatingly; "I should die for certain."

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"You think so now," he murmured, tenderly.

"I was never a very strong child, if you remember, Luigi. Don't try to flatter yourself, or me, that I shall ever be a strong woman. Why, have you forgotten that time when we were staying with you at the Villa Ferrari, how, when I was so ill, the Princess sat up with father, night after night, until they were both worn out?"

"And then I sat up with old Maria," he continued, taking up the tale. "What awful rubbish you talked that night, Nell!"

"I dare say. It was only the good nursing, and father's determination, that pulled me through then, Luigi. If I were to lose you, I should go off just as he did."

"Heaven forbid it!" he exclaimed. "Come, let us go, before we get the blues."

"Do you know," he said presently, when we were riding quietly along, "that Mrs. Sandys has asked me to go down to Hutton Royal?"

"Not really?" I cried. "How delightful!"

"Yes, is it not? Then I shall be able to picture you there, as well as here."

"Picture me! When?"

"When I am away from you, child."

"I forgot that," I said. All the light of the glorious day seemed to fade as he reminded me of it. "I suppose you will be obliged to go."

"I think so. You see, dear, I ought to be at home to look after things; in fact, I ought to be there now; and, besides, as I don't mean to claim you for a year, I cannot reasonably remain here all that time."

"A year," I repeated, blankly, very blankly, indeed.

"Yes, my darling," edging a little nearer to me. "I have been thinking it all over this afternoon, and I feel

sure you ought to have a little time before you bind yourself to me."

"I don't want any time," I said, rebelliously.

"Not now. But perhaps in a few years you may wish you had had it. The day you are eighteen, I shall come back to claim you, if you still wish for me."

"And I am not to see you until then?" I exclaimed.

"I think not, my dearest. Of course, I shall be in England for some weeks yet, but I must not come again until I come to claim you. I want you to be perfectly free till then."

"I won't be free," I said, fretfully.

"You must please yourself about that," he replied, laughing; "only I shall ask you to make me no promises, though I shall be glad enough to find you have been true; as I know you will be," he ended, in a low tone.

"I never heard of such a thing," I cried, plaintively. "One would think that you could not trust me; that I had to go through some trial to be proved good enough."

"I mean only true kindness," he said, gently.

"Yes, I dare say; but I never heard of such an absurd thing in all my life," I returned.

"I am only anxious that your happiness should not be wrecked. If I followed my own inclinations, I should like to go into there now"—pointing with his whip to a church we were just passing—"and be married without any more fuss at all; but, as I think of your welfare a little more than my own pleasure, I put the idea away as impossible."

"Would you like that?" I asked, smiling once more.

"Oh, my darling," he said, and his answer satisfied me.

"And so," he continued presently, "that you may be the more perfectly unfettered, we will not tell any one of

our love until you are eighteen; then, if I am lucky, the whole world may know it."

"Very well."

"You will come in?" I said, when we reached home again.

"I cannot, dear. I have to see my lawyer at six without fail."

"But you are coming to dinner?"

"Yes, of course. Eight o'clock, I suppose?"

"Yes," I answered. "Then we shall expect you."

"You will ride again to-morrow?" he asked, as Charles opened the door.

"If you will take me."

"No need to answer that question. Shall I say in the morning at eleven?"

"Very well. George," I said, turning to the groom, who had been looking diligently at Cigarette's heels since I dismounted, "be ready at eleven to-morrow morning."

"Very well, miss," he answered.

"Would he not come in?" said Mrs. Sandys, as I went into the drawing-room.

"No; he has an appointment with his lawyer," I answered. "But he will be here to dinner and thanks you very much for asking him. "How are you, Lord Maurice?"

"I am glad he has accepted my invitation," said Mrs. Sandys, pleasantly, "because the De la Mottes are coming."

I was silent.

"Can you join us, too, Maurice?" she asked, turning to Lord Maurice.

"Oh, thanks, very many, I shall be delighted," he answered, but still there was very little delight in his tone.

"He doesn't seem to like Miss De la Motte very much," I remarked, when he had gone.

"Who,—Prince Ferrari?"

"I meant Lord Maurice," I answered.

At this she laughed.

"Oh, no, I dare say not. Maurice and she were great friends two seasons ago, but, like so many of Winifred's great friendships, it did not last."

"I should not care to have such a character," I said, simply. "Of the few gentlemen I know here, Rufus detests her, and Lord Maurice, whatever he may have thought once, is thoroughly unhappy in her presence. He looks positively afraid of her."

"And Prince Ferrari?" she asked.

"I don't know," I answered, doubtfully.

"Oh, my dear," she cried, laughing, "your Italian friend is just going the way every man goes who meets with Winifred De la Motte. I don't know what there is about the girl to fascinate them so. She is handsome, certainly,—of a cold, colourless type,—but she has not a word to say for herself, and she has no pursuits whatever. I never heard her sing a note, or saw her turn her head, even, to listen to the finest music one ever heard. She rarely dances, and then never anything but squares; she neither rides, skates, nor plays tennis or golf. In fact, she does nothing but dress well and look like a handsome statue."

"A regular fish," I put in.

"Yes, just a fish. And have you ever noticed that she very rarely meets your glance? Such beautiful eyes she has, too. I wonder she does not make more use of them."

"Have you ever noticed her look at a man?" I said, scornfully. "She makes use enough of them then; it

is only women upon whom she does not waste her regard."

"Well, well; she will make a very handsome Princess Ferrari," she declared. "What have you there, my dear?"

I held out the miniature Luigi had brought me, and which I had forgotten to show before.

"It is a portrait of my mother," I said. "Prince Ferrari has the original, and he got it copied for me."

She took it out of my hand, and held it so that the full light might fall upon it.

"A beautiful woman," she said, slowly, "a most beautiful woman, Fane Ferrars's wife."

"It was very kind of him to have it copied for me, was it not?" I said. "I did not know there was a portrait of her in existence until the other day, when he was here. He met with it by chance in Signor Valdano's studio, and begged it of him; he had taken it without my mother's knowledge, just before her marriage."

"And so he gave it to you," she said, still looking at it.

"No, he offered it to me," I replied. "But I did not think it fair to accept it, so he has had it copied here in London for me."

"My dear child, this is an original Valdano," she cried; "and this must be the original, for Valdano died last week in Paris."

"How very strange!" I murmured, taking it out of her hand. True, I did wonder a little that he had had the initials "G. F." set in the loop, instead of "Nell;" but, of course, they were my mother's initials, and he had given it to me just as he had kept it all these years. I wondered how I should ever thank him enough.

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## CHAPTER XVI

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### I AM NOT SURE

"DINNER is waiting, Miss Ferrers," said Mrs. Sandys's maid, coming into my room hastily.

"Have the people come?" I cried, in dismay.

"Yes, ma'am, they have gone in."

"Oh!" I ejaculated, and ran down quickly. "I'm sure I beg your pardon," I said, giving a hand to Mrs. De la Motte, and slipping hastily into my place, next to Winifred.

"We thought you had gone to sleep," Mrs. Sandys said, indulgently.

"No, not quite; but I was in a brown study, which is almost as bad."

To my disgust I found that Luigi was sitting at the head of the table, and so was on the other side of Miss De la Motte. He smiled at my disappointed face and then I saw that his eyes brightened as he noticed the miniature on my bosom.

"We have found you out," I said.

"Found me out, have you?" he said, laughing. "How?"

"Oh, Mrs. Sandys and I together," I answered. "Or, rather, to be quite honest, it was she who made the discovery. I never thought of its being a real Valdano, though I ought to have known it."

"Oh, that!"—laughing a little, yet reddening, too. "I could not put you off with a copy."

"How very tiresome all that art is!" murmured Miss De la Motte, placidly. "I never could understand it. The schools and the style, the originals and the after. They are so stupid! I met a man the other day who told me I was pre-Raphaelite, and he was disgusted because I did not know what he meant."

I looked at Prince Ferrari, and we both laughed.

"Have I made a stupid remark?" she asked, coldly. "I thought, from what you said, that you did not understand all the art-jargon of which one gets so tired."

"Nell has mixed amongst art and artists all her life," said Prince Ferrari, the amused smile still lighting up his face.

"Have you known Prince Ferrari long?" she asked, turning quickly to me, and speaking in a tone of great surprise.

"All my life," I answered, quietly. "Why, did you think I have only known him since I came to England?"

"Yes; I thought so. I am sure I cannot tell why, but I was certainly under that impression. And so you, too, are crazy about art?"

"I do not think so," I answered. "I am very fond of it, and of artists, too; but that is because I know so many and understand it all so well. Prince, do you remember the fun we used to have in the studios at Rome?"

"Yes, and how many Miss Ferrers may be seen still, in every describable dress and attitude," he said, laughing.

"Have you sat as a model?" asked Miss De la Motte, with chill disapproval.

"Dozens of times," I said, candidly. "Did you never do so?"

"Never," she answered, emphatically.

"Then you have never been to Rome," I remarked, "or you would have been teased into doing it. What an Ice Queen you would make!"

"No. I have never been to Rome," she answered. "We intend going there as soon as the New Year is over."

"This New Year?" I cried, looking at Luigi, who frowned a little, as if the news was not agreeable to him.

"Yes. Prince Ferrari says that is the most pleasant time to go," she said, sweetly. "From New Year until after Easter."

It suddenly occurred to me that the frown I saw a moment ago on Luigi's face did not so much betoken annoyance on hearing Miss De la Motte's information as annoyance that I had heard it; but I made no sign.

"You will like Rome, I have no doubt," I said, civilly. "But do not imagine you will escape doing duty as a model."

"I shall not permit it," she replied, with dignity.

"Oh, you will not be asked," I laughed. "The artists will take you from every possible point, and you will see yourself years hence figuring in every imaginable character, as the Ice Queen; 'La Belle dame sans merci;' studies without end; and, very possibly, as Tennyson's Maud, if any of the English students think of it. I should imagine they will not make a Madonna of you. Do you think they will, Prince?"

"I cannot say, I'm sure," he returned, in a tone of indifference.

His tone brought an angry gleam into her cold eyes, and she flashed one swift, scornful glance at him. I too

glanced at him, and I saw that he was looking straight at Mrs. Sandys and never noticed her or her wrath.

I should have liked to laugh, but I felt it would not be polite, so I refrained, and just then Mrs. Sandys signed for us to make a move, for which I was not sorry.

"I had not the least idea that you knew Prince Ferrari," Miss De la Motte remarked, when she had settled herself comfortably on a low couch. "I was never so surprised in my life."

"I do not see why you need have been," I answered. "I am more likely to know him than any one in London, seeing that I have lived almost all my life in Italy, and he has scarcely ever been in England at all."

"How very well he speaks English!" she said.

"Oh, he had an English nurse and an English tutor," I told her. "And then, of course, he always spoke English with the Princess. She never knew Italian very well, though she lived in Italy so long. I think that was because he always spoke English with her."

"Is Italian a difficult language to learn?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," I replied. "You see, I learned it as a mere baby, just as I did French and German, so I am not a good judge. English people rarely speak it well."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. But that is the truth," I laughed. "Why? Are you thinking of studying it?"

She reddened slightly, so my chance shot had evidently taken effect.

"Prince Ferrari is not much like an Italian," she remarked presently.

"You think not?" I asked.

"He is too fair."

"Oh!" I said, quietly. "I did not know."

"And yet he is quite one's idea of a Roman patrician," she continued.

"A perfect Mark Antony," I said, carelessly: "only, you know, he is a Florentine."

"Oh, I thought he was a Roman," she said. "But he lives in Rome," she continued.

"Yes," I answered. "The Casa Ferrari is in Rome, certainly, but the Villa Ferrari, which is his family estate, is near Florence. It is a lovely old place," I added, impulsively.

For a few seconds she did not speak, then she said:

"So he is going down to Hutton Royal?"

"Yes," I said. "Who told you?"

"He told me himself," she said, quietly, "this afternoon."

This afternoon! Then that was why he could not come in to tea. I ought to have said would not.

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## CHAPTER XVII

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### MY DARLING

MISS DE LA MOTTE'S words took my breath away so effectually that I simply could not speak, and just then I heard something of Mrs. Sandys's conversation to Winifred's mother.

"Of course we shall be very quiet, for I had intended to remain with Nora until Christmas at least, and so have invited no one for this autumn; but Prince Ferrari has promised to come down on Monday or Tuesday, and it would be such a good opportunity for——" Her voice sank to a whisper, and I rose impatiently.

"Will you excuse me?" I muttered, and went before I could hear her reply.

I met the three men in the hall,—Lord Maurice and Geoffrey De la Motte walking together, chatting, and Prince Ferrari a few steps behind them. He deliberately turned back into the dining-room when he saw me, and the others entered the drawing-room without him. As soon as the door was closed, I came down the two steps I had already mounted and darted after him.

"What glorious luck, my darling!" he said, laughingly.

"Luigi," I cried, eagerly. "I want to ask you something. Why would you not come in to tea this afternoon?"

"I could not, my pet. I had an appointment with poor Mary's lawyer."

"But you saw Miss De la Motte," I said, suspiciously.

"Yes, so I did. As it happened, this lawyer lives in the same square as she does, and she dragged me in before you could say knife."

"What to do?"

"To look at some piece of china. She was sure it was Italian; and so it was, of a very common kind."

"You never told me," I said, reproachfully.

"That I had been in her house? My darling, I never saw you until dinner, and I couldn't impart the information before her, could I?"

"What a fool I am!" I cried, joyously.

"My sweet little fool, my most wise little fool," he murmured. "We must go back to the others now, though these stolen moments are doubly sweet."

"They say a cat always enjoys stolen milk the best," I remarked, dreamily. "I wonder if it is true?"

"Human cats do," he laughed. "At least this one does. Now I am going; you must come in presently."

I ran upstairs, and glanced at myself in the glass, just to see if I was presentable, and then I went slowly down and entered the drawing-room quietly.

That I had never been missed was very apparent. Luigi was sitting beside Miss De la Motte, his stately head bent to listen to something she was saying. Her mother, Lord Maurice, and Mrs. Sandys had their heads very close together, and their merry laughter came rippling out every moment. Only Squire Geoffrey was alone, and he was looking at my scrap-book.

"I must say, Miss Ferrers," he remarked, as I drew near, "that that is one of the very worst bulls I ever saw in my life. It wouldn't take a prize at a village show."

I glanced over his shoulder and saw that the book was opened at Paul Potter's "Bull" of world-wide renown.

"I don't know anything about cattle, Mr. De la Motte," I said, indifferently; "but the painting is one of the most famous in the world."

"Bless my life!" he muttered. "Why, his back isn't straight! I think they couldn't have had any short-horns when that was painted."

"Most likely not," I answered. "Will you have a cup of coffee?"

I had taken mine some time since, and Charles had spoken to him more than once with a view of obtaining the same information.

"Mr. Paul Potter should have had my Duchess of York. He might have made a good picture then. But to take the trouble to paint that,"—looking contemptuously at the photograph,—“why, the fellow couldn't have had an eye for an animal at all.”

I could not resist laughing, he was so innocent and so hearty. When I turned round, I saw that Luigi's blue eyes were fixed upon him with an expression I had never seen in them before. He rose from his seat and moved nearer to us to listen.

"Oh, you may laugh as much as you like," continued Squire Geoffrey, still gazing at the picture. "I admit I don't know anything at all of painting, but I do know a fine bull when I see one; and certainly I never saw such a miserable brute as that in my life. But," with a sudden, bright inspiration, "perhaps it's an Italian bull; and, of course, I don't know anything about them."

"You are a fool," muttered Luigi between his teeth; at which I laughed aloud. And then we moved away,

leaving Geoffrey, in blissful ignorance of his folly, to inspect the rest of the book.

"Sit down again," said Mrs. Sandys, cheerfully, half an hour later; "you need not desert us because Miss De la Motte has gone."

"Heaven bless me!" he murmured, piously; at which I went off into a smothered fit of laughter. "Do you hear that, Nell?" as Mrs. Sandys and Lord Maurice settled down to their gossiping once more.

"Yes, I hear it." And then I sang as well as I could for laughing,—

"Then her blue eyes seem present to me,  
'Neath tresses all golden and flowing!"

"Are her eyes blue?" I said, doubtfully. "I hardly think so; I fancy they are grey."

"They are grey-blue," he answered, promptly,—let him laugh and ejaculate as he will, he knew the colour of Miss De la Motte's eyes to a nicety,—“a kind of slate.”

"Or cold steel," I remarked.

"They might look so if she were angry, but I have never seen her so."

"As it happens, I have, and more than once. What colour are my eyes?" I asked, lazily.

"It is difficult to say," he answered. "Some eyes are very shallow,—Miss De la Motte's, for instance,—and one can get to the bottom of them and define their colour in a moment; but yours,—they puzzle one. I should say a moss-green and mouse-colour mixed would produce nearly the same effect."

"What a compliment," I laughed, "moss-green and mouse-colour! I won't forget that. Do you know what colour yours are?"

"What you call in England boiled gooseberry," he answered, promptly.

"Quite wrong," I said, looking up at him. "Sometimes, when you don't quite open them, they are perfectly violet; but when you let the light in upon them they are a very bright, clear blue; and when you are angry, they look absolutely black."

"When have you seen me look angry?" he demanded.

"Oh, several times! This morning, for instance."

"I don't think I look angry, child—sorry, perhaps."

"Well, whatever it was," I said, forcing myself to speak lightly, for his tone touched me not a little, "don't look like that again if you can help it, will you? It hurts me?"

"I should so like to kiss you just now, Nell," he declared, in a passionate whisper, "but, just at present, it is utterly impracticable. However, I'll owe it to you, and I'll pay up on the first available and convenient opportunity."

"Very well," I answered, laughing.

Soon after this they went away, and then Mrs. Sandys came into my bedroom for ten minutes' chat.

She told me that we were to go down to Hutton Royal on Saturday, that Prince Ferrari was coming on the Monday or Tuesday following, and that the De la Mottes would arrive on Wednesday. She imparted the news under the evident impression that I should be charmed by it, and I—well, I had not the heart to undeceive her. It would have been better for me if I had.

At last I was alone, free to think over this wonderful day, to look once more at the mother whose face is as that of a stranger, to think about my darling.

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## CHAPTER XVIII

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### HUTTON ROYAL

WE were settled at Hutton Royal, and I was charmed with everything I saw around me.

Mrs. Sandys watched my delight as I wandered about the old place, with an amused yet complacent face.

And, oh, it was all so lovely! I do not know which I admired most: the quaint, red-brick Elizabethan mansion, the more quaint terraces, or the most quaint alleys and gardens in which the pleasure-grounds were laid out.

I think that the house had, perhaps, the greatest charm for me,—there was so little of the commonplace about it. It was built in the form of a quadrangle, in the centre of which lay a smooth lawn, surrounding an old moss-grown sun-dial, while around the lawn ran a broad, neatly-kept, gravelled drive.

On the side of the quadrangle facing the avenue was a wide archway; immediately opposite was the great entrance, which occupied that entire side of the house from basement to roof.

Facing the principal entrance again was another large door, leading on to the terrace, which entirely surrounded the house, and from thence to the gardens; to the right and left of the hall was a great flight of stairs, those on the right leading to the principal bedrooms, those on the left to the bachelors' corridor; and running round the entire hall was a wide gallery.

Anything like that hall it had never been my lot to behold. For days I wondered how it was kept free from dust.

Like the entrance hall of the house in town, it was more a *salon* than an entrance; and I found that Mrs. Sandys was very fond of sitting there. An immense Turkey carpet lay on the polished oaken floor, and in the middle thereof stood a huge round table of oak, covered with papers and periodicals. The great open hearths at either end were filled then with ferns and flowers, and a most artistic effect of lights and shadows was obtained from the judicious arrangement of paintings, arms, armour, and cabinets full of rare porcelain. There were easy-chairs of the most luxurious description, a grand piano, covered with rich embroidery, and many little tables. I found that the house abounded with rare and costly treasures. But comfort was by no means sacrificed to an undue worship of the past. For instance, my bedchamber, the walls of which were panelled, was entirely furnished with carved oak, and bore an ancient date; yet the carpet was modern and the bedstead was of brass.

It was nearly five o'clock on the Monday afternoon when Prince Ferrari arrived. I happened to be in the hall when he came, so I ran out to the top of the great steps to greet him.

"I am so glad you've come," I said, in Italian. I was not inclined to talk stilted English for Charles and the coachman to hear. "I thought the tiresome, stupid afternoon never would come to an end."

"Glad to see me?" he asked, as he gained my side, and we entered the house together. "What have you been doing with yourself? Riding, of course?"

"This morning, yes; and for the rest, I have been

wandering about the house and gardens, wondering which of them is the loveliest; but I cannot make up my mind at all. Do you know, Luigi, I hardly wonder at Mrs. Sandys making such a choice. I can almost understand any one selling his soul for such a place as this."

Before he had time to answer me, Mrs. Sandys came quickly across the hall.

"Welcome to Hutton Royal, Prince," she said, cordially.

I had quite forgotten to bid him welcome.

He bowed as only an Italian can, and she continued:

"You will think English hospitality consists solely in eating and drinking, but you are just in time for tea. But, if you would prefer wine, or anything else, while we women are drinking the cup that cheers, you shall have it."

"I would prefer tea, thank you," he answered. "I learned to like it from my wife, who was thoroughly English."

"Do you remember how she used to try to persuade father it was good for him?" I put in; "and he always said, 'My dear Princess, to please you I will drink it, only, if I am as cross as two sticks to-night, do not be surprised if Nell's indignation proves too much for her manners, and she abuses you.'"

"So like him," murmured Mrs. Sandys, tenderly; then she roused herself, as if those tender bygone recollections were more than she dared trust herself to enter upon.

"Have you seen anything of the De la Mottes since we left town?"

"I had the pleasure of dining with them yesterday," he answered, smiling.

For my part I did not see anything to smile at. "So they are coming down here?"

"Yes. What a charming girl Winifred is!"

"Particularly so," answered Luigi, gravely. "Maurice de Vonne seems to find her remarkably so."

Mrs. Sandys looked up quickly.

"Oh, you mustn't think anything of that, Prince," she said, lightly. "She never gave Maurice a second thought. And, of course, it was no wonder that he—he—should have been—a—little—she is so very handsome."

"Very," he agreed. "A most statuesque beauty."

"Yes," she rejoined,—how eager she was to say a good word for Winifred. "And so perfectly graceful, too; so refined, so—so——"

She stopped short, hesitating for a word with which to further express Miss De la Motte's charms, and I looked steadily at him. His violet eyes were regarding his hostess gravely, but he did not offer to help her out at all.

"What was that word you used the other day, Nell? Not exactly distinguished, but——"

"I don't remember," I replied.

"No! Ah, well, it doesn't matter." And then she fell to talking of other things and our conversation did not again revert to Winifred De la Motte.

I hardly spent any time over my toilette that evening.

But, early as I was, I found Prince Ferrari already in the hall, he not knowing where else to go.

"I thought I should find you here," he remarked, cheerfully. "Is this the general sitting-room, Nell, or only the entrance hall?"

"The hall, you foolish man," I answered. "Come, I will show you the way to the drawing-room. Do you see

that door? Well, that is the ballroom. Such a lovely apartment. Such a floor."

"We will get Mrs. Sandys to play us a waltz after dinner," he said, gaily; "and then we will have a dance all to ourselves."

"To-night, perhaps," I returned, gloomily.

"Yes, and to-morrow night too," he laughed. "And then the next night I shall have to turn and turn-about between you and Galatea."

"You may have her altogether by then," I retorted, "for Rufus will be here, and I am sure he won't dance with her if he can help it."

"Oh, take Rufus away and lose him," he exclaimed, impatiently; "or Miss De la Motte. I don't care which."

"Yes," I laughed, opening the door of the drawing-room, "I believe Rufus hates her like poison."

He closed the door and followed me across the room to the window, where we stood staring at the view, which was nearly the same as that to be seen from the hall; park, backwoods, coverts, all the very same, but with a slightly more western aspect.

"Prince," I said presently.

"Princess," he responds, gravely; but I did not laugh, as he evidently intended me to do.

"What have you been doing since we left town?"

"The usual thing, dear,"—sitting down on the deep window-seat,—“the usual thing,—Park, shops, dinner, with a delightful shade of bore over everything."

"Did you enjoy your dinner last night?" I asked; at which he laughed and drew me down on to the window-seat beside him.

"How could I enjoy any dinner at which you were not present?" he asked. But I noticed that he did not

distinctly answer my question. "It was a great joke, that same dinner," he continued, putting an arm round me, as though such an idea as jealousy had never existed in the world. "I could not help laughing, though I was horribly annoyed at the time. You know, my dearest, that we—Maurice de Vonne and I—were going to Lady Beauchamp's on Saturday?"

"Yes, I know she asked us," I answered. "Go on."

"Of course, Galatea and her people were there; and, after dinner, Mrs. De la Motte asked me to dine with them on Sunday. Last night, you know."

"Yes," I said, as he paused.

"Well, like the fool I am, instead of saying simply that I was engaged, I went into detail; and, my little one, let it be a warning to you never to go into detail if you can possibly avoid it; it's a very bad plan. Unfortunately, I was sufficiently stupid to do so on Saturday night, for I said I should have been perfectly charmed, had I not been already engaged to Maurice de Vonne; and, as a proof of how our evil deeds do follow us and trip us up, very often sooner than we expect, she turned sweetly round to Maurice, and said she should be delighted to see him, too. If Maurice had had any sense he would have immediately remembered that he had invited some other man as well; but Maurice has not any too much of the article, for he stammered and stuttered for ever so long, and finally said he should be very happy. And there I was."

"And there he was, too," I said, laughing.

"Ah, that was just the very worst of it all. After letting me coolly in for the evening, he backed out at the last moment, on the score of being out of sorts; and, when I looked into his rooms on my way home, I found him

as jolly as a sand-boy, playing the piano, with a cigarette in his mouth."

"It just served you right," I said, cruelly.

"Possibly,"—shrugging his shoulders a little; "only it made very little difference, last night, where I ate my dinner."

"Why?" I asked, sharply.

"Because you were not within dining distance."

"Ten minutes to eight," I remarked, irrelevantly; "Mrs. Sandys will be down in a minute."

"Then, for mercy's sake, kiss me before she comes," he cried. "And then go and sit in that chair over there, as if you did not belong to me."

"No more I do," I laughed.

"Don't you?"—holding me close to him.

Then, my quick ears having caught the sound of high-heeled shoes on the corridor above, I established myself in a chair at a discreet distance from the window-seat, just as if we had never, either of us, looked twice at the other.

I wondered how Mrs. Sandys could look at either of us and not find us out; and yet she did not. And any time during the evening and the following day she might have discovered us twenty times, if she had been at all of a suspicious nature. But she did not. No, she was very kind indeed to Luigi, giving him hints every now and then of what a perfect wife Winifred De la Motte would make, praising her beauty and her talents, which, for the most part, I believe, existed only in her own imagination.

Still, I did see a great deal of Luigi,—for Lord Maurice, one of Mrs. Sandys's greatest friends, was down at Manor Court, only a mile or two away, and, as his people were all abroad, he came over for nearly all his meals, and might as well have been staying in the house.

So Luigi and I were left to wander about at our own sweet will, which, by and by, generally took us to an arbour in the East Garden, where, screened from view of the house by tall, close-clipped hedges of box and yew, we were fairly free from observation, and, moreover, could hear footsteps a hundred yards away. So there we sat, hour after hour, in an absurd arbour, all trellis-work and roses, to say nothing of the earwigs and the spiders, talking the most utter nonsense that ever two lovers talked in this world,—which is saying a good deal.

But, all too soon, Wednesday morning dawned, and by eight o'clock I was out in the fair, fresh sunshine. Perhaps what makes the sunshine and the morning more fair and fresh was that my tall lover, clad in white from head to foot, was sitting smoking on the terrace-wall, with the early sunbeams playing all manner of tricks with his red-gold hair.

"You'll get a headache, sitting there without a hat," I said, as I reached his side.

"Then let us go for shelter to the East Garden," he answered, "and you shall gather me a flower for my button-hole."

"How came you to be up so early?" I asked, as he rose.

"I thought it just possible you might be out," he answered, laughing. "I remember your habits of old, and, as yesterday morning Mrs. Sandys did not appear until nine o'clock, I thought we might spend the hour very profitably together."

"Ah, well!" I said, with a regretful sigh, "to-morrow you needn't trouble to get up."

"Why?"

"Rufus will be here, and he gets up so frightfully early. He says soldiers always do,"

"Oh, I dare say!" he exclaimed, wrathfully. "But I'm not going to be put on one side for young Rufus. Confound him! I wish he were——"

"You said so before," I answered. "But wishing that won't do any good; besides, he will only be here two days."

"Then we will try if we can steal away unobserved," he suggested. "For ten to one, he goes straight to the stables; Englishmen always do."

"I wonder if she gets up early too?" I remarked.

"Galatea," he began, but I interrupted him, fretfully.

"I wish you wouldn't call her that," I cried; "one would think you wanted to play the part of Pygmalion."

"The Saints interpose and protect me," he ejaculated, "if ever I get such a bee as that into my bonnet!"

I burst out laughing then.

Although Prince Ferrari spoke English almost perfectly, he came out sometimes with an idiom or a saying in a way that was irresistibly funny, and his exclamation made me forget my future woes entirely.

"And so you don't like me to call the lovely Winifred 'Galatea'?" he said in a teasing tone.

"Would you like me to call Rufus by some fancy name?" I asked, gravely.

"Certainly not,—do you?" he asked, quickly, looking all alert and sitting quite upright.

"I might call him Sir Knight of the Trustful Countenance," I said, dreamily; "he is so wonderfully consistent."

"Do you call him that?" he demanded, his imperious blue eyes all ablaze.

"I call him—Rufus," I answered, quietly.

His face relaxed, and he sank down again into his old lounging attitude.

"I was afraid," he remarked, in a relieved tone.

"Afraid! Of what?"

"That my nose was disjointed," he answered, promptly.

"I think, my friend," I said, "that we had better betake ourselves to Italian."

"I say, Nell," he said presently, having taken no notice whatever of my remark, "I wish this young Rufus was not coming."

"So do I."

"Because I don't half like this hide-and-seek business; and if I catch him making love to you, I shall feel sorely tempted to toss him out of the window."

"Oh, pooh, my dear, you are in civilised England now," I laughed; "they don't allow such things here. It is only in romantic, Old-World Italy that two men come to blows over a woman; and, besides, Luigi, you may make yourself quite easy on that score,—for if Rufus wants to make love to me at all, you may be sure he won't make it with you looking on."

And then happily the sound of the breakfast-gong boomed out, and I ran away, before he had time to say a word.

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## CHAPTER XIX

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### A BRIEF RESPITE

"How early you are, Nell!" said Mrs. Sandys, pleasantly. "Is Prince Ferrari down?"

"Yes," I answered; "and he has a white suit on. Ever so much smarter than English clothes."

"Perfect," she murmured, as he entered. "Good-morning, Prince; nice morning, is it not?"

"Charming," he said, smiling.

"Ah," I cried, enviously, "I wish I could wear a white dress!"

"You really cannot, dear," she said, persuasively.

"No, I must smother myself in nasty, dusty, hot, heathenish black," I cried, "to suit the opinions of Mrs. This, or my Lady the Other, whom I don't know by sight and for whose opinion I don't care a fig. And, besides that, I have always the pleasing consciousness that father would be horribly angry if he could see me. Would he not, Prince?"

"I can't say. I never did see him horribly angry," he answered, laughing.

"Well, no; perhaps not; but he would be extra severe on society in general," I maintained. "Certainly his very first words would be, 'Nell, child, go and take off that most unbecoming garment!'"

"Luigi," I said, after breakfast, when Mrs. Sandys had

gone to pay her morning visit to the housekeeper, "don't you hate me in black,—candidly, now?"

"Hate you?" he echoed. "Why, my darling, I couldn't hate you if you were in rags and tatters."

"Well, no, of course not. But don't you dislike seeing me in it?"

"Not particularly."

"Do you mean to say you don't like to see me better in one dress than another?" I demanded, incredulously.

"Of course not. I love you equally in all. Now, as an absolutely beautiful dress, a dress which would show you off to the utmost advantage, I would choose purple velvet; yes, purple velvet, slightly embroidered with gold, and with a lot of antique lace about it. When we are married, Nell, we will have such a dress made."

"It would be rather warm for this weather," I said, doubtfully, "but we might have it for winter use. Tell me another, Luigi, you have such wonderful taste."

"Another. Let me think. Oh, cloth of gold, with blood-red sleeves and trimmings! Why, child," he exclaimed, laughing, "are you going to change me into a man-milliner?"

"It seems natural to talk to you about dress," I replied. "I always did to father, you know. He had perfect taste; but, then, everything must be white to really please him."

"You look well in white; every one does. I believe it is called 'trying,' but that is a mistake. It is the softest, least trying thing any one can wear."

"I like it best," I said, stroking his sleeve. "I like this the best of anything you wear, only——"

"Only what?"

"It takes me back to the time when there was no

tiresome Rufus, no Galatea; when there was nothing disagreeable, and when there was Daddy; and when I think of that it makes me sick with longing to leave all this"—stretching out my hands comprehensively—"and go back to the old life, when there was no pompous Charles looking down his nose, but, instead, a comfortable *garçon*, who didn't care what sort of manners one had."

"Or morals either, for that matter," he murmured.

"Well," I continued, "it's very dreadful to live in fear of your servants. They say Britons never shall be slaves; but it seems to me that they all live in a state of bondage to their own servants. I'm sure the way that solemn-faced Charles patronises Mrs. Sandys is simply disgraceful. I wouldn't put up with it, if I were she."

"Then, Charles does not patronise you?"

"Oh, dear, no. He doesn't condescend. In fact, he looks upon me as a kind of savage,—not that he has any need," I went on, wrathfully, "for he doesn't know half as much or make himself half as useful as an ordinary *garçon*."

Then we wandered out into the garden, for we had decided to ride during the afternoon, so that we might be out of the way when the De la Mottes should arrive.

"Where shall we go?" I asked, as we stepped out on the terrace.

"That comfortable out-of-the-way arbour," he suggested.

"But suppose Mrs. Sandys wants us?"

"She will find us as easily there as anywhere else," he remarked, carelessly. "I mean to make the most of this morning, Nell; for who knows when we may have another all to ourselves?"

"Ah, who knows indeed?"

"What may to-morrow be?  
Who can tell?  
Will it bring delight to me?  
Who can tell?"

I sang, softly, for I was not by any means anxious to attract attention to our shady bower.

"Where did you hear that?" asked Luigi, lazily.

"I don't know; somewhere in London, I fancy. I do not remember any more of it. I wonder what to-morrow will be for us, Luigi?"

"Thursday, of course," he answered.

"Yes, but what will it bring?"

"Not so much happiness as to-day."

"To-day brings Rufus and Miss De la Motte," I remarked, gloomily. "Oh, what a fine thing it would be if *they* would only fall in love with each other. But they won't.

"No such luck," he laughed.

"I expect they will soon find us out."

"Then we must be very cool to each other," he said.

"I think I shall take to calling you Miss Ferrers."

"If you do, they will both guess the truth at once; and, after all, Luigi, why should they not know?" I made the remark in the most insinuating tone imaginable, edging a little nearer to him as I spoke.

My lover grew grave instantly.

"Don't tempt me to break my faith, dear," he said, earnestly. "I believe I am doing what is best for your future happiness. I know this parting will be hard. Heavens, child, do you not think I feel it? And yet I do it for your good."

"Shall I tell you what I think about it all?" I asked.

"You know, Luigi, I shall never, as long as we live, go

against your wishes; but I cannot, all the same, help having my own thoughts, my own opinions. Well, though I will do exactly as you wish in this, as in all else, I do think that for once you are wrong. To a certain extent, we are deceiving every one here, and I am convinced no real good ever came of deception yet. I am sure father would not have liked it at all."

"Perhaps you are right, dearest," he said, slowly. "But the case stands thus: either I must deceive them or act in a way which I think unfair to you, and naturally I think of you most."

"You will be sorry for it one day," I told him.

"Yes, if I lose you, I shall be sorry; and yet, darling, if you are happy I shall be content. I love you even so much; and, believe me, there are not many men who would tell you that—with truth."

"So much," I repeated, "and yet you cannot trust me sufficiently to marry me. That does not seem to me like a great love. Why, father would have trusted me to New Zealand for twenty years and would never have doubted me."

"My darling, that is quite another thing," he said, with an impatient sigh. "And the mere fact that you cannot understand my views, only proves to me the more that I must keep my resolve."

I, too, sighed. I did wish he was not so punctiliously honourable; that he was not so determined to leave me utterly unfettered. And then, just then, a new idea occurred to me, an idea which found its way into my brain with the rapidity of lightning and with the burning pain of a hot iron, searing my soul and chilling my heart. Perhaps he was not so altogether anxious on my account to leave me perfectly free; perhaps he was not quite will-

ing to bind himself. I turned to him blindly; indeed, I could scarcely see him for the dark mist which had come before my eyes.

"It must be as you wish," I said.

I sat leaning against him still, for I had not the courage to try to take myself away from his strong grasp, my dazed eyes stared at the quaint garden, out of which all the sunshine and the brightness seemed to have faded, at the neatly-clipped hedges of box and yew, which somehow had lost their tender green and looked all grey and withered. How strange it is that when one has just received a deadly blow the mind fixes itself on trifles which at another time would never strike one at all! The grey appearance of everything just then struck me very forcibly.

Apparently Luigi noticed nothing. I listened to his tenderly expressed thanks for my acquiescence for the first time in my life without an answering flow of tenderness in my heart and with unsmiling lips. Even whilst I was listening I was trying to collect my thoughts and think,—think what? That, after all, he did not care very much about me; that he did not want to bind himself. Then, why did he say that he loved me? Why did he ask me to marry him? Alas, alas! the loop-hole was no real one, only a broken straw at which I clutched in vain, only to sink back deeper than ever into the slough of despond. It was easily explained; for the love he bore my mother, his friendship for my dead father, he was prompted, when he came to England and found me desolate, to make love to me as the only means of comfort he possessed, at the same time taking care to leave me free, perfectly free, for a whole year, to be passed in a different country to himself, probably in the hope that I

should avail myself of my freedom and marry somebody else.

"Nell,"—it was Mrs. Sandys's voice which rung through the quiet air,—“Nell, dear, where are you?”

I jumped up without speaking, but Luigi caught at my dress.

"Nell, dear, are you going away without kissing me?" he asked, reproachfully.

I jerked my dress out of his grasp, impatiently. I had no heart, just then, for anything of that sort; so I went swiftly through the fair, smiling walls of green to the terrace, where I found Mrs. Syndys.

"Nell, dear child," she said, laughing, "do you think you could induce Bob to go out with you? Mr. Lawrence is here, and Bob evidently does not like him; he is growling most savagely."

"Who is Mr. Lawrence?" I asked.

"My lawyer, dear. Is Prince Ferrari out with you?"

"Yes."

"Ah! Well, I shall be glad if you will keep him amused until lunch-time," she said. "I did not expect Mr. Lawrence to-day, but he has some important business to transact with me."

So I retraced my steps along the terrace, down the broad flight of stone steps at the end, and along the garden walks to the arbour.

"I thought you'd gone off in a huff," he remarked, as I reappeared.

"And if I had done?" I asked, sitting down on the seat, only this time at a convenient distance from him.

He laughed, and, putting his arm about me, drew me close to him.

"I should make myself very easy on that score," he

said, with cool confidence. "Because you couldn't remain very long unfriendly with me."

I said nothing, only watching Bob snapping majestically at the flies.

"What did Mrs. Sandys want?" Luigi enquired.

"She wanted me to take Bob out of the way, and to amuse you until lunch-time," I answered. "Her lawyer has come and Bob took an unreasonable dislike to him."

I had been wondering how it was that he did not notice the change in my voice; but he did so at last. He turned almost round and looked at me keenly. I felt myself flush scarlet under his gaze.

"I don't believe you are well, my treasure," he said at last. "Have you a headache?"

"Yes," I answered, and with perfect truth; "though it does not ache half so badly as my heart."

"And I, like a fool, have been plaguing you all the morning," he cried, reproachfully. "I am afraid, darling, when we are married, you will very often find me an awful fool."

"Luigi," I said, eagerly, "do you think we ever shall be married,—really, I mean?"

"It will depend upon yourself, my little Nell," he answered, looking down upon me with what certainly appeared to be a very tender smile.

"Are you quite sure it does not also depend upon you?" I asked. In spite of my gloomy forebodings, in spite of the hundred and one signs which all seemed to point to the fact that he was not really in love with me, that he did not really wish to make me his wife, I was feverishly anxious to believe his words, even against hope and reason, and so I asked, "Are you quite sure it does not also depend upon you?"

"Well, I might die," he began, doubtfully; "but otherwise——"

"Don't, don't!" I cried, sharply. I could better bear his indifference than that, and somehow I forgot my headache altogether, and my heart-pain was lulled to sleep again for a little space.

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## CHAPTER XX

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### DOUBTS AND FEARS

AND so during the morning we spent among the roses and earwigs Prince Ferrari contrived to creep more closely into my heart than ever, and I went to luncheon quite cheerful and happy.

"I suppose," said he, in reflective tones, as we passed along the terrace, "that as you have such a bad headache we shall miss our ride?"

"Oh, it is much better now," I replied. "Don't say anything about it, Luigi. Mrs. Sandys makes such a fuss if anything ails me."

"And how have you been amusing yourself, Prince?" Mrs. Sandys asked, when we went into the dining-room.

"Immensely, considering that Mrs. Sandys was not near," he replied, gallantly.

"Of course, that is understood," she said, laughing. "But what have you been doing?"

"We have been sitting in an arbour, trying to fancy ourselves in Italy, and really the earwigs did not make such bad scorpions, with a little make-believe to help us."

She laughed, and then, turning to me, she said,—

"Had you not better take the dog away until Mr. Lawrence has gone? He growled ever so savagely at him."

"Oh, is Mr. Lawrence here still?" I asked.

"Yes; he will be with us in a moment."

"I will take him then. Come, Bob, my precious, and let us see what we can find in the way of eatables."

Bob rose majestically and followed me out of the room; but, as we reached the library door, it opened, and he expressed his disgust by a long, low, sullen growl. I did not see Mr. Lawrence at all, for he shut the door again hastily, and, after a good deal of persuasion, Bob consented to follow me.

However, when I went back to the dining-room, Mrs. Sandys introduced Mr. Lawrence to me; so he had found sufficient courage to come out of his safe retreat.

"You and Bob have not made friends," I remarked, laughingly, to him.

"I don't like him at all," he answered. "I consider him a most dangerous brute."

"Ah, that's because you're afraid of him," I said, carelessly; "and he knows it. What a strange thing it is that dogs always find out and dislike people who are afraid of them! Now, he will let me do anything with him."

"I wonder you can keep such a savage brute," he said, favouring me with a long, searching stare, which made me grow hot and indignant all at once.

"I would not part with him for the world," I returned, emphatically.

"My son gave him to Miss Ferrars," Mrs. Sandys said, quietly.

"Oh, I see."

What a hateful little wretch he was. To me he was completely detestable, from the crown of his semi-bald, foxy head to the soles of his two awkward large feet. I looked aside at Luigi to express my silent, though very strong, disapproval, but he was staring persistently at his plate, and never even glanced at me. So I too con-

fixed my attention entirely to my lunch and dropped out of the conversation altogether.

"You are going to ride this afternoon, Nell, I suppose?" said Mrs. Sandys presently.

"Yes. Why? Do you want me for anything?"

"Oh, dear, no! I shall be busy with Mr. Lawrence till our visitors come. I am afraid, Prince, you will think me unconscionably rude; but this business is of the greatest importance, and I know you and Nell will be able to entertain each other."

"Oh, yes. Pray, do not trouble about me," he said, politely; then added, "We Italians never require much amusement so long as it is warm; and there is nothing I dislike so intensely as being treated as a visitor."

"That is all right," she said, heartily; "and after this afternoon, Nell will have some one else to help to amuse you."

"Well," I said, rising, "I must be going to get ready for our ride."

It did not take me very long to change my dress for a habit, and I ran downstairs to find Mrs. Sandys just entering the library.

"Much pleasure, dear child," she said, kindly; "tomorrow Rufus will ride with you."

"Yes."

"You will enjoy that. I believe you really like this obstinate son of mine."

"Of course I do. I like him all the better for his very obstinacy; only, dear mother, I don't call it that. I call it consistency and truth."

"Call it anything you like, so that it pleases you," she answered. "But when you are Mrs. Rufus you will very likely come round to my way of thinking."

"I shall never be Mrs. Rufus," I said, in a low tone and with a burning face.

"Ah, we shall see!" she rejoined, quietly; "we shall see, Nell." And then she went into the library and shut the door.

"Come and look here, Nell," said Luigi, as I entered the dining-room; "is not this strange?"

He pointed to a round hole worn in the window ledge by the rain dropping from the upper half of the window. It was nearly full of water then, probably in consequence of the shower which had fallen during the night.

"Constant dropping will wear away a stone," I remarked. "And I should not be at all surprised if the constant dropping of the next year does not end in making me Mrs. Rufus Sandys."

"If you are happy, I shall be content," was his reply.

I suppose Mrs. Sandys, considering that this was Prince Ferrari, and not Rufus, her son, would have called this firmness of character; I thought of it as obstinacy,—plain and unvarnished obstinacy.

"And so you are going to resign me to the lovely Galatea?" he said presently.

"I am not going shares with her," I answered, quietly.

The laughter in his eyes faded out and gave place to the expression which, every now and then, made me feel sure he really did love me.

"I shall never ask you to do that, my darling," he said, softly; "neither with Galatea nor any other."

"It would be no good if you did," I replied. "For I never, never should."

It was late in the afternoon when we got back to Hutton Royal, and I suggested that we should go straight to

the stables and dismount there, for I was in no mind to be seen all over dust and very hot and sunburnt.

As we rode into the yard, the harness-room door opened, and Rufus came out.

"How are you, Prince?" he said, civilly. "Well, Mouse, it's quite a treat to see you. How have you been getting along?"

"Very well," I answered, cheerfully. It was true, on the whole.

"And how has Bob behaved?"

"So, so," I said, doubtfully. "Very well with me, you know, but he doesn't like everybody. There's been a Mr. Lawrence here to-day, and Bob wouldn't have him at any price."

"Sensible Bob. Lawrence is a horror. I always hated him myself. How did you get on with him?"

"I did not get on at all. I never tried," I answered. "And I thought him rather impertinent. Did not you, Prince?"

"Very," he said, decidedly; "in fact, if he had been in my house I should have kicked him out at once; as it was, I simply never spoke to him."

"Well," I remarked, that subject being quite exhausted, "I must go and get rid of this dust. Have the De la Mottes come, Rufus?"

"Yes, an hour ago; but I have not seen them yet."

"Why, did you betake yourself to the stables as a haven of refuge?" I laughed.

"Exactly so," he answered. "However, I shall be obliged to go in now, I suppose."

But, all the same, when I reached the door leading to the west corridor, I looked over the railing of the gallery and beheld him sitting at the table looking at last week's

*Graphic*, with apparently no intention of moving. Luigi had disappeared in the direction of his room long before.

And when I came into the gallery again, there was Rufus still sitting at the table in the hall, occupied this time with *Punch*.

"You here still!" I exclaimed.

He looked up at me.

"Yes. I am waiting to go into the drawing-room under the shadow of your protecting wing," he answered.

"Very well," I said, laughing, as I reached his side; "but I don't suppose Galatea—that is Prince Ferrari's name for her—will want to gobble you up."

"Oh, dear, no," he answered, easily; "Galatea has other fish to fry."

"What sort of fish?" I demanded.

"Sardines, I should fancy," he said, coolly. "Which is, you know, a Mediterranean fish of the herring family. Oh, it's no wonder, when she has such a delicacy as that within reach, that she takes but small account of his very inferior English brother."

"Surely," I thought, with an inward groan, "he, too, is not hankering after this piece of 'dead perfection'! Well, we must go in now, or she will see you are afraid of her," I said, aloud.

"All right. I say, Mouse,"—looking down at me with a kindly expression in his blue eyes,—“are you glad to see me back again?”

"Very. I missed you awfully at first, Rufus."

"Did you though? Oh, hang it, here's Galatea's sardine coming!"

At this I went off into a peal of laughter, and Rufus was obliged to join me in spite of his vexation.

"You are much amused," said Luigi.

"Amused," I echoed, breaking out afresh, while Rufus, after trying very hard to choke down his mirth, followed suit. "Come," I said, when I was able to speak, "we really must go in. They will have heard us laughing, and they will think us so rude."

And so we went into the drawing-room, and, as Rufus was in front of me, I took the opportunity of slipping my hand for one moment into that of Luigi.

"I will tell you after," I whispered; at which his fingers, which had held mine passively, closed round my hand quite tightly ere they released it.

At the door of the drawing-room Rufus paused.

"You go in first," he said to me; and so, with a brave front, however great may have been my inward misgivings, I went in.

"How are you, my dear?" was Mrs. De la Motte's kindly greeting. "I think the air here agrees with you, you look so much better."

I answered her and passed on to her daughter, who was standing at one of the windows.

"How are you, Miss De la Motte?" I said, as cordially as I could and holding out my hand.

"Quite well, thank you," she answered, favouring me with her usual hand touch, while her cold grey-blue eyes went past me to Prince Ferrari's tall figure.

I withdrew my hand from hers with a good deal of my bravery taken out of me, and stood looking awkwardly on while she and Luigi greeted each other. I felt furious with her for the air of mock modesty with which she drooped her white eyelids until her eyes were hidden; only just then I caught a gleam of mischievous amusement which had come into his violet orbs, and I was strongly tempted to laugh instead.

He had taken her hand and was bending over it with perfect grace.

"It is such a pleasure to see you again," he said, in a low tone.

"Oh!" she murmured in a nearly inaudible voice, and raising her eyes at last to his. "Why, do you not like the country?"

"I look upon Hutton Royal as the nearest approach to Paradise I need expect to attain in this world," he answered; at which she looked more gratified than ever. I, who knew what he meant, felt more tempted than ever to go off into one of my extravagant fits of laughter, so I moved quietly away to where the others were standing.

"I say, Nell," whispered Rufus, "but those two are going it pretty strong. That's just the way she always dodges them. 'Oh!' in that deprecating way of hers, and great play with her eyes, meekly down and then artlessly up."

"Be quiet," I said, laughing. "I don't want her to see us laughing at her."

"Bless you, child, she'd never see it; she's using all her eyes just now as fish-hooks!" he exclaimed. "Oh, Nell, dear, do play something for me. I haven't heard a piano since I left town."

Someone asked me to sing a little later, and I did a little doleful ditty about a garden and a grave and a heart all alone among the faded flowers.

Luigi seized the first opportunity of coming to my side.

"My, Nell," he said, softly, "that song will haunt me for ever. Why did you sing it?"

"Do you care for me so much?" I asked, eagerly.

"Oh, my darling," he whispered. "Why do you doubt it?"

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## CHAPTER XXI

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### GALATEA OR ANOTHER?

It was just seven o'clock when I awoke the next morning. The sun was streaming through the windows upon the carved oaken panels of my room.

Such a lovely day it was. I drew up the blinds and flung the windows wide open, so that as much air as possible might find its way in; and then I dressed in such gay lightness of heart that even the obnoxious black seemed less odiously sombre than usual. Just as the great brass clock in the hall was striking eight, I opened my door and went softly down the corridor, like a cat or a thief. It was but the work of a moment to run softly down the stairs and across the hall. I looked cautiously out of the door to see if the terrace was clear, and, finding that it was, I fairly took to my heels and never stopped until I reached the shelter of the arbour, where I ran right into Luigi's arms. He seized me gladly enough.

"What perfect luck!" he exclaimed. "I've been here myself ever so long and only missed young Rufus by a hair's breadth. Did I not tell you he would go straight to the stables? Well, I watched him, and I was right."

"Good boy," I murmured, approvingly. "He knows he is safe from Galatea there."

"Oh, I dare say she will fish him out. I met her maid in the hall half an hour ago, with her letters and a very smart pair of boots, and she would be sure to tell her she

had seen me, and as equally sure will Galatea find her innocent way to the stables, to see the 'dear horses.'"

As in the case of Rufus, so he was right in this. Before many minutes had elapsed, the sound of footsteps made Luigi speedily release me and brought a hasty word to his lips.

"Here she comes," I said, peeping through the trellis-work; "perhaps she won't see us. What a good thing my dress is black!"

Whilst I was watching her come mincing along the gravel path Luigi's quick eyes had caught sight of a door in the back part of the arbour, and he had wrenched it open.

"Come in here," he said, hastily dragging me in and closing the door behind us. Happily it opened inwards, and he was able to set his back against it and so defy almost any ordinary strength to open it.

"Here is a bolt," I said, pointing to one; upon which he fastened it and came to my side.

The little room in which we found ourselves was but some six feet square, and was evidently part of the mansion itself, probably provided in some by-gone day as a means of escape, for there was another door dimly visible in the wall opposite to the one by which we had entered.

Luigi had already turned to a narrow opening in the wall, covered by a grating, and shielded by the trailing roses.

"Can you see her?" I asked.

"Hush—h—h!" he said, cautiously; "come here."

I slipped between him and the wall, so that we could see out through the lower half of the grating. Miss De la Motte was on the walk just outside, clad in a fresh white dress, with pale blue ribbons, and in her hands were some

creamy roses. Just as I got into a good seeing place, she entered the arbour and seated herself on the very bench on which we had been sitting five minutes before. Then there was a sound of footsteps, and down went the fresh white skirts on the dusty floor, and down went her hands in idle, unstudied grace, among the creamy roses. And, after all, it was only Rufus!

He came gaily along the garden path, in utter unsuspectance of the pitfall into which he would walk in another moment, and then he too entered the arbour.

"Why, Miss De la Motte, is that you?" he exclaimed, in great surprise.

"Yes, it is I," she answered, sweetly; wonderfully so, considering how intensely disgusted she must have been in reality. "Is it not a perfect morning, Mr. Sandys?"

"Oh, yes, lovely," he answered, leaning against the trellis-work entrance, in a way which made me tremble for the entire structure, and also for the shower of earwigs and ants which would presently descend upon him. "I've been up ever so long; I did not know you were such an early riser."

"No? But it is such a tempting morning," she said, sweetly still. "I suppose you are going to the stables?"

"Yes. Will you come, Miss De la Motte?" I could have screamed with laughter at the eager way in which he caught at the suggestion.

"No, thanks. I don't care for horses much; perhaps it is because I do not understand them. In fact, I consider it bad form for a lady to know all the points of a horse, as if she were a dealer."

"That's one for me," I observed, in an undertone.

"Sure, I don't know," returned Rufus, brusquely. "I never did care a great deal for form myself, or anything

else that half-a-dozen cackling old women constitute as such."

"I am afraid you are a Radical," she laughed.

"I believe I am," he answered, frankly. "Then you won't come and look at the horses?"

"I think not, thank you."

"Then I shall see you again at breakfast;" and he briskly betook himself away in the direction of the stables.

"Poor boy, what a take in!" I whispered.

Luigi gave me a little nudge that I might look at Galatea, who was bending forward, watching the departing Rufus with a very unpleasant expression of countenance indeed.

"You young idiot!" she said, aloud. "Lout! Boor!"

At that I could contain myself no longer. I buried my face against Luigi's broad chest and went off into a violent paroxysm of laughter. He held me close to him, so close that I was almost suffocated, and my laughter changed to equally uncontrollable coughing, which I tried my very best to smother with his handkerchief.

When I had recovered myself, Galatea had vanished.

"Where is she?" I asked, wiping my streaming eyes.

"Gone," answered Luigi, laughing himself now. "She looked round ever so sharply and muttered, 'Rats,' and then she fairly took to her heels and ran away. Come, let us be out of this. It was a fortunate circumstance, those 'two strangers meeting at a festival,' only they were not strangers, nor at a festival. Henceforth we shall find this arbour tabooed by both of them."

And so we enjoyed a very pleasant half-hour, until the breakfast-bell summoned us back to the house.

We were the last to appear, and it was no easy task to

greet Rufus and Galatea as if we had not seen them before, but Luigi's example helped me to do it.

"Good-morning, Miss De la Motte," he said, cheerily; "what a charming morning!"

"Oh, lovely," she answered, pleasantly. "I was out—oh, ever so early—and gathered myself a nosegay. You see what you late risers have missed."

"Ah, I didn't want to interrupt your pleasant tête-à-tête with Sandys," he said, deliberately.

"My tête-à-tête!" she stammered, for once quite taken aback; "who told you I had seen Mr. Sandys this morning?"

"A little bird whispered it," he answered, laughing at her dismayed expression and Rufus's angry, crimsoned face.

I gave him a kick—ever such a hard one—to say no more, for Mrs. Sandys looked terribly annoyed; but he took no notice of it, and continued in a teasing tone.

"Yes, a little bird told me all about it."

"Then the little bird must have been a complete fool, Prince," Rufus broke in, vexedly. "The fact of the matter was this. I happened to be passing through the East Garden on my way to the stables, and Miss De la Motte was sitting in the arbour. If saying 'good-morning' constitutes a tête-à-tête, well, then we had one."

"And, pray, did the officious little bird tell you anything else?" she asked, having somewhat recovered her self-possession by this time.

"Oh, yes! It told me that you ran away in fear of rats," he said, coolly, "and that you got your dress soiled on the dusty floor of the arbour."

"Oh!" She glanced down, and so did I, for I was next to her, at the hem of her cambric dress, and saw that in

several places it was soiled and marked with dust. I looked from it to her face, but I turned my eyes away immediately, for just then she was not pleasant to see.

Presently I heard Luigi enquiring if he had vexed her.

"Did you really see me in the arbour?" she asked, raising her eyes to his face.

"Did I not tell you it was a little bird who told it to me?" he said, gravely.

"No, but really?"

"Really," he repeated.

The temptation to laugh was too strong for me, and Miss De la Motte turned upon me in dignified astonishment.

"Did you hear this absurd story, too?" she demanded.

"Yes, I heard it," I answered, laughing.

"From Prince Ferrari, of course?"

"Prince Ferrari did not tell me," I returned.

"It is inexplicable," she said, at last, "and I wish you would explain it to me."

"I cannot do that," I answered, quietly.

"Why?"

"Because the secret is not my own and I do not feel justified in betraying it."

I did not add, as I might have done, that if the secret were my own, and only my own, I should still be disinclined to tell her.

"I should like to know," said Mrs. Sandys, suddenly, and in a tone which implied that she wished our conversation at an end, "what plans there are for this morning. Mrs. De la Motte and I are going out in the victoria; but what do you all intend to do?"

"You promised to ride with me, Nell," said Rufus, hastily.

"Very well," I answered, "I am quite willing. Are you thinking of going?"—turning to Galatea and Luigi.

"Will you ride?" he asked her.

"I? Oh, thank you; I do not ride."

"Then we must have the landau," said Mrs. Sandys, "unless you and Winifred would like to drive somewhere in my cart."

"I am quite at your service," said Luigi, courteously.

"Are you?" murmured Miss De la Motte, softly, and in a slightly incredulous tone. Then she spoke in her usual voice.

"I should very much like to drive to that pretty waterfall at—at—oh, I forget the place."

"At Exwith," put in Mrs. Sandys, complacently. "It is only about five miles."

"Then shall we arrange so?" asked Rufus.

"Yes, I think so," answered his mother. "I dare say Maurice will be over this afternoon, and we could have a game at croquet. I think we really could not dispose of the morning better."

And so from the breakfast-room we all sauntered out into the hall and spent an hour very profitably, playing the piano, looking over the papers, listening to the histories of the armour and the old china, and finally descending to the degradation of fortune-telling by various means ere we dispersed to dress.

Luigi, however, managed to linger until the others had all disappeared.

"Darling," he laughed, "I think we have contrived to puzzle Galatea, and to keep both of them away from the harbour for the future. Did you ever see any one so thoroughly taken aback in all your life?"

"She will pay us both out for it," I answered.

"Pooh! What can she do? You don't have the vendetta in England."

"Vendetta! No, of course not; but, my dear Luigi, there is vendetta of the soul, of peace of mind, of human love and happiness, and I am afraid your Galatea is just the woman to be utterly without mercy."

"Galatea be smothered! But, Nell, mind you don't let young Rufus tease our secret out of you."

"Mind you don't let her coax it out of you," I retorted.

"She will prove herself a clever woman if she does," he laughed; "and I don't consider her to be a clever woman at all."

"There is someone coming," I announced, and flew up the stairs like one possessed.

I looked over the gallery and beheld Charles the sedate. But it was just as well that he did not catch us "spooning." I went quietly then to my bedroom, and, whilst dressing, became aware of voices in the next room,—that is, Mrs. Sandys's dressing-room. How very thin the walls must be, evidently only divided by the oaken panelling. I continued my dressing and the voices went on talking.

"I tell you, I want an explanation," I heard Mrs. Sandys say, suddenly; she must have raised her voice considerably.

"And I tell you that I cannot give one," was the answer. That was Rufus.

"Why?" she asked, imperiously.

"Because I am as completely and entirely in the dark as yourself."

I did not half like this. I moved about the room to let them know that they were not out of my power of hearing, but the voices continued louder than before.

“ Well, Rufus, you need never think to make that girl mistress of Hutton Royal. I will never receive her as your wife.”

“ I shall never ask you to do so,” he answered, “ I hate the very sight of her.”

“ Who is it?” I wondered. “ Is it Galatea or another?”

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## CHAPTER XXII

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### CROSSED SWORDS

"I WONDER," said Prince Ferrari to me, as we stood on the top of the great entrance steps, "how I shall contrive to stow my legs away in that thing?"

I glanced at the legs, which certainly were long, seeing that he was six feet three inches in height, and then at Mrs. Sandys's cart, and I must confess I felt rather puzzled on the subject myself.

"Perhaps she will drive," I suggested; "and then you might sit behind and let them dangle over the back."

"Shouldn't I turn the whole trap topsy-turvy?" he laughed. "Galatea, too, perhaps. That would be a scene worth remembering."

"Here she comes," I said, that he might make no more such remarks.

"Miss De la Motte, will you drive?" he asked, as soon as she reached us.

"No, thank you; I never do," she answered, sweetly; "I do not admire masculine women."

"No, you said so this morning," he responded, coolly. "I quite forgot that."

"Did I tell you so this morning? I do not remember."

"Perhaps not. It was our friend the little bird who told me."

At this moment Rufus appeared, and I asked Luigi to

put me up. When I was in the saddle and comfortably settled, I turned round to her.

"So you think me masculine, do you, Miss De la Motte?" I remarked, with a laugh.

"I never said so,"—with a deprecating air.

"I ride and I drive," I responded, quietly, "and I know the points of a horse as well as a dealer; all accomplishments you consider masculine and bad form! Fancy Fane Ferrers's daughter being called bad form, eh, Prince?"

Luigi laughed out aloud, and Rufus turned away quickly, that his mother's guest might not see the look of amusement on his face, while Miss De la Motte flashed a glance at me, which I was a fool to brave.

I was a fool, there is no doubt about it, for I braved it still further.

"And yet, after all," I said, confidentially, "bad or good form is all pretty much a matter of taste, is it not? Now, I cannot see much to admire in artificial 'dolly' women, who affect to despise the things they are unable to do themselves. Well, are you ready, Rufus? Good-bye. I hope you'll enjoy your drive."

"Rufus," I said, penitently, as we went along the drive, "I am afraid I've been awfully rude."

"Pooh, nonsense! Serves her right," he answered. "I absolutely hate that woman, Nell. By the way, how did you know I saw her this morning?"

"Oh, I can't tell you that."

"You won't, you mean," he rejoined. "I can't imagine how you knew, excepting you were in the garden."

"Oh, dear, no! Indeed I was not," I answered, decidedly.

"Then how did you know?"

"A little bird," I laughed. "All about the cackling old women and everything."

"Well, I was savage," he admitted, "because I knew it was a hit at you. She doesn't like you, Nell."

"Not at all," I said, carelessly. "And I detest her."

"How long are they going to stay?" he asked.

"I really don't know. I believe we are going to their place. What is it called? Oh, Scriven! Yes, that is it. We are going there in November; chiefly, I believe, that I may have some hunting and the pleasure of seeing the Duchess of York in all her glory for the cattle-show."

"Very jolly, too," he said. "With a little management you may succeed in making yourself the mistress of Scriven, and it's a lovely old place; far grander than Hutton Royal. Now, I'll tell you exactly how to manage it, Mouse. Just set old Geoffrey on about the short-horns, and the Berkshire pigs, and tell him they are perfect pictures, all of them, and I'll lay any odds that after a week you have him on his knees."

"Oh, I dare say," I admitted; "and be condemned for the rest of my life to an atmosphere of short-horns and Berkshire pigs! No, thank you, Mr. Rufus Sandys; I would rather be excused. I think I shall try to coax Mrs. Sandys in another direction."

"Very well, child; only, you know, there isn't a Scriven in the market every day."

"I think I shall be able to exist without a Scriven at all," I answered. "I am sure I could not exist very long with it, as Mrs. Geoffrey. And you forget, Rufus, there would be the long, long visits from mamma and my sister. I think I never could get over them, if I could accomplish the Squire."

"Oh, Winifred wouldn't trouble you much," he

laughed. "She will have betaken herself to Italy, and probably her mother would live almost entirely with them."

"With whom?"

"The Ferraris."

"I am quite sure Mrs. De la Motte will never live with the Ferraris," I said, quietly.

"Then she will have to go to Geoffrey."

We had not spoken with the same meaning; but I could not explain mine, and so I left his remark unnoticed.

"Rufus," I said, with a gravity which equalled his own, "I am afraid I must resign the idea of reigning at Scriven. I must be content with some other establishment."

"Hutton Royal, for instance," he suggested.

"Hutton Royal is a lovely old place," I answered, evasively, "whatever Scriven may be."

We had come within sight of the house while I was speaking, and I pointed to it with my whip.

"Yes, it is a lovely old place," said Rufus, looking at it with loving eyes. "And, upon my word, one can hardly wonder that the *mater*——" And then he broke off sharply; but, all the same, I knew quite well what he was going to say; it was: "One can hardly wonder that the *mater* sold herself for it."

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## CHAPTER XXIII

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### A MESSAGE

I WENT down to lunch that day feeling that if an opportunity occurred I must be as civil as possible to Galatea, to make up somewhat for the morning, and, therefore, I wished, as I crossed the hall, that I could, even to myself, make the excuse of temper for what I said to Galatea; but, being a fairly honest young person, I could not do that. No, I simply, and almost maliciously, said what I knew would annoy her; and it would be no wonder if she utterly ignored me for the future. And then I remembered that I had had a good deal of provocation from her. She certainly had no right to call me "masculine" to my very face; and it was still worse to hint behind my back that I was bad form. So it was with my head at its usual elevation and scarcely a meek feeling in my heart that I turned the handle of the dining-room door.

"How did you enjoy your drive?" I said to her, as gaily and as unconsciously as I could.

"Oh, very much indeed," she answered.

"You both looked as if you were enjoying yourselves," said Rufus. "Didn't they, Nell?"

"Oh, very much so," I replied, taking my seat.

"I never saw you," said Miss De la Motte, impressively; "did you, Prince?"

"I? No; where were you?" he asked, turning to me.

"I'm sure I don't know. You forget that I, like yourself, am not at home in these parts. Where was it, Rufus?"

"By Witham Hill," he replied.

"Oh!" murmured Galatea, looking in an odd kind of way at Luigi. "Did you see us there?"

Rufus looked at me, and I wondered why she thought it necessary to fuss about it. Probably they were only chatting upon ordinary topics, even if they did look rather sentimental; and, surely, not even a man's sweetheart would have him drive another woman out and sit morn all the time. At least, I was not such a jealous fool as that.

"Come into the garden, Nell," whispered Luigi to me, when we rose from the table; and so I took my hat off a table in the hall and went straight out with him.

We turned instinctively to the East Garden and the arbour. He was very quiet, hardly like the same man I saw in the little carriage by Witham Hill.

"Oh, my Nell," he said, miserably, "I have such a headache."

"Have you?" I answered, sympathetically. "What brought it on?"

"That horrible, see-sawing little cart, I should think. I won't go out in the wretched cramped-up thing again to please any one. Ugh!"—stretching out his long legs,—"I don't know whether the cramp in my legs or the pain in my head is the worst. Do contrive, Nell, to keep me clear of it to-morrow."

"Didn't she amuse you?" I asked.

"Amuse me! I assure you her tongue never stopped once,—jabber—jabber—jabber! She isn't bad to look at, if she would only keep her mouth shut. But of all the

vapid, empty rubbish I ever heard a woman talk, hers was the emptiest and most vapid."

What mistakes people may make! Now, looking back at the view we had of them, going up Witham Hill, I should have unhesitatingly given it as my opinion that they had enjoyed each other's society immensely; and yet, here was Luigi with quite another story. It shows how careful one ought to be not to judge entirely by the evidence of the eye.

"Well, don't stay here," I said, presently. "If I were you, I would go and lie down in the morning-room and try to sleep awhile. It would do you ever so much good."

"Very well." He roused himself and rose to his feet.

How frightfully ill he did look; so ill that, if I had not seen him once or twice in the same state before, I should have fancied he was going to have a serious illness.

"There is Lord Maurice," I said, as we passed along the terrace.

"Where are they all?"

"In the West Garden," I answered. "They're going to play croquet. They must be crazy, all of them."

"I can't play," he said, wearily. "Why, Nell, child, I can scarcely see my way. I'm very much afraid I am going to have a week of this. What a nuisance; in a strange house, too."

"Oh, no!" I cried, cheerfully. "Rest for a while in this nice, cool room, and I dare say you'll be all right by dinner-time. I'll go and make excuses to the others."

I only stayed to put some cushions comfortably under his head and then I went out into the West Garden, where all the others were gathered.

"We thought you'd taken your departure for good," laughed Mrs. Sandys. "Where is the Prince?"

"He has a dreadful headache," I answered; "so I have made him lie down in the morning-room."

"A headache! Oh, poor man, I'm sure I am very sorry for him," she cried. "I know what a headache is; you had better get him something cool to drink, Nell, unless you will take my place."

"No, thanks," I answered. "I really do not know how to play."

"Then look after the invalid," she said, kindly. "I dare say you will manage him better than any of us. Is he subject to these attacks?"

"I have known him to have them when we were staying with him," I answered. "The Princess used always to give him champagne."

"Did she? Then you had better go and talk to Charles about it," she said. "Make him give you a bottle of the best. And, Nell, child, have a glass of it yourself; you look tired and rather white. Indeed, I think it will be best for you to keep quiet too this afternoon, as we all ought to do. I think we must be mad to attempt playing with such a sun as that."

"Now, Nell, are you going to play?" asked Rufus, coming up to us.

"No. Prince Ferrari is ill and she is going to look after him," answered his mother.

"Ill! What's the matter with him?"

"Bad headache," I answered.

"Oh, bother!" he exclaimed, crossly. "Can't you send Galatea to attend to him?"

"I think Nell had better go, Rufus," said Mrs. Sandys, kindly. "She has seen him like this before and knows

what to do for him; besides, she is not fit to stand in this burning sun; she looks as white as a ghost herself."

"Yes, you do look white," he remarked, sympathetically. "Mother, I'm sure a glass of champagne would be good for her."

"How thoughtful you are growing," she answered, smiling. "But you are too late, for all that. Nell is just going in to get some for the Prince, and I have ordered her to drink some herself."

"Good-bye," I said, cheerfully. "I hope you'll enjoy your game." But from the expression of his face I doubted if he would.

Just as I entered the hall, Charles the irreproachable came out of the dining-room vestibule.

"Oh, Charles," I said, "will you take a bottle of champagne into the morning-room?"

My request, seeing that it is but three o'clock in the afternoon, might surprise any one, but his solemn face remained unmoved.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered.

"And, Charles," I continued, as he was moving away, "Mrs. Sandys said I was to tell you to bring the best, please,—the very best."

"Very well, ma'am;" and then he vanished, and I went on to the room where I had left Luigi.

"How is the head now?" I asked.

"Awfully bad," he murmured, drowsily.

"Poor thing!" I said, sympathetically. "Rufus wanted to send Galatea to look after you, but I thought you would not like that."

"I'd rather die at once," he answered, keeping his eyes covered with his hand. "Who's that?" he asked, as Charles came in.

"Only Charles," I answered.

I moved to the table and stood there whilst he poured out a glass of the lovely amber wine.

"What is that?" I asked, seeing that he had laid a yellow envelope on the table.

"A telegram for his highness, ma'am."

I took it in one hand and the wine in the other.

"Here is some champagne for you," I said, quietly.

The announcement was sufficient to arouse him at once, and he drank it eagerly.

"I've been absolutely craving for it," he said, gratefully; "only I did not like to ask for it. How ever did you know that was what I wanted?"

"I have not forgotten how the Princess used to coddle you," I laughed. "Will you have some more?"

"Oh, yes, child, any amount. It is so wonderfully fine."

"Here's a telegram for you," I said presently.

"Open it then," he answered, lazily.

I tore it open and read:

"From Constantino Lippi to Prince Ferrari, October — The Princess very seriously ill; but little hope of recovery. Please come at once."

"Oh, Luigi!" I cried.

"What is it, child? Not bad news?"

"It is your mother," I answered.

He took the telegram out of my hand quickly enough then, and read it for himself.

"I suppose you will have to go at once?"

"No, there is a train somewhere between eight and nine, which will just catch the mail from Charing Cross. I may as well wait here as in London."

"Of course; and then you can lie there this after-

noon. What a pity it is your head is so bad, just when you have such a long journey."

"Ah, well," he said, philosophically, "I couldn't have stood another drive with Galatea."

"I wonder what is the matter with the Princess," I remarked.

"Oh, the usual thing, of course. She thinks I have been long enough in England, and that affairs are getting neglected, and so she falls ill. Don't distress yourself, child; I know what it means; and the Princess knows I know, and yet I cannot, for very shame's sake, pass such a summons over unnoticed."

"You will find they have cried wolf in real earnest one of these days."

"I wish my head did not ache so," he said, irrelevantly. "I wonder," he said presently, "where Conradi is?"

"We can soon discover by ringing the bell," I answered. "Do you want him?"

"Yes, child; the sooner he knows we are going home the better."

So I rang, telling James, who came in answer, to send Conradi to the Prince. In a few moments he came, a dark-eyed, smooth-voiced Italian, with the face of an old painting and the manner of a noble.

"Her highness is ill again, Conradi," said Luigi; "so you must be ready to go up to London by the evening train."

"Do we cross to-night, your highness?" he asked.

"Yes, certainly."

"I think," I said, when Conradi had disappeared, "that I had better go and tell Mrs. Sandys of the change in your plans."

"Very well; but come here first,"—stretching out an arm and drawing me close to him. "Tell me, are you sorry I have to go away?"

"Sorry," I answered, with a great sigh; "I don't know how I shall be when you are gone. I dare not think about it. Luigi, you will write to me, won't you?"

"Not regularly, my darling. I will write now and then."

"And will you not be in England for a whole year?" I asked, forlornly.

"I shall very likely find myself unable to keep my resolution," he answered, smiling. "Very probably, if you look out for me next season, you will see me."

"I wonder what will happen before I see you again?" I said, wistfully. "I don't think you know how I dread these awful months: not a face I know, not a voice that is familiar. Oh, it is terrible! Of course, Mrs. Sandys is very kind, very fond of me. I believe she would do anything for me, for father's sake; but, after all, she is as much a stranger as any of them. There is only Cigarette who really knows me."

"I wish I could stay," he said, doubtfully; "but, you see, my mother may really be ill this time, and if I didn't go, it would make a frightful scandal."

"Oh, of course you must go!" I cried. "I am very stupid, Luigi. I don't think I am as plucky as I used to be; but I dare say I shall manage to exist until we go to town again. And you will be here in the spring, did you not say?"

"Yes, I shall be here in the spring," he answered. "I wonder, Nell, how I shall find you? Nell Ferrars still?"

"Nell Ferrars still, and true," I said, gravely.

"And glad to see me?" he questioned.

"Glad! Yes, I shall be glad, dear," I answered. "And now I think I had better go and tell Mrs. Sandys, had I not?"

"My Nell," he said, still keeping me a prisoner. "I believe you want to get away as soon as possible."

"Because I have not courage enough for these horrible farewells," I answered. "I feel dull and dazed at the prospect of losing you; and talking so much about it only makes me realise it sooner than I need. I don't want to begin crying just yet," I said, with a brave effort to keep up; "for if I do, I shall weep, like Niobe, all day, and they will all see our secret."

"She's a good child," he murmured, approvingly.

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## CHAPTER XXIV

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### ALONE

"GOING away?" cried Mrs. Sandys, ere I could impart my news. "Why? Is he vexed?"

"Oh, no; but the Princess is very ill," I answered.

"The Princess? Good heavens, child, you don't mean to say the man's married all this time! Well, I consider him a perfect impostor."

"It is his mother," I cried, hastily, "the old Princess,—Dowager, I suppose you would call her,—and she is very ill; he has just had a telegram."

"And what is he doing?"

"Oh, he is still on the sofa in the morning-room. He is going by a train between eight and nine, and will catch the mail to Paris to-night."

"Oh, yes. Well, I am sorry. It will quite spoil our party, will it not, Winifred?"

Miss De la Motte blushed becomingly, and murmured something to the effect that she was very sorry and hoped the Princess was not seriously ill.

"The telegram said, 'Seriously ill; but little hope of recovery,'" I replied. "But Prince Ferrari does not seem much alarmed. It is a way his mother has when she wishes to have him home."

"Of falling seriously ill with but little hope of recovery!" cried Mrs. Sandys, laughing. "Not a bad plan

by any means. Well, child, need I go in just yet, or is he best left alone?"

"Left alone," I said, decidedly, seating myself upon a garden bench, and opening a white umbrella as a means of protection from the disagreeable little flies and gnats buzzing about me.

"Then left alone he shall be," she declared. "It is of no use pretending to play this afternoon,—it is too hot, a great deal. I am going into the kitchen-garden to see what fruit there is. Mrs. De la Motte, I believe you too like it stolen."

"Yes, I do," Mrs. De la Motte admitted.

"Then, will you come? Maurice, I need not ask you."

The three disappeared round the west wing of the house, leaving Galatea, Rufus, and I looking awkwardly at one another.

"It is terribly warm this afternoon," she remarked, subsiding gracefully on to the other end of the bench.

"I rather like it," said Rufus, taking possession of a basket chair.

For my part, I did not believe that he liked it at all; he only said so for pure contradiction; simply that he might disagree with her.

"And you look so cool and comfortable, Miss Ferrers," she continued to me.

"I have always lived in warm climates," I answered. "My father could not bear cold, and we used to move about so as to catch the sunshine."

"Ah, I wonder how you will like our winters!"

"Are they very cold?"

"Sometimes; if not frosty, they are very dull and foggy; 'soamy,' the hunting-men call them. I think you will find our spring months the most trying."

"Yes? So cold?"

"Oh, terrible, generally. Such cold winds, they seem to pierce you through and through."

"How dreadful! I shall have to invest largely in furs. You must go with me to choose them, Rufus."

"All right."

"It is chiefly to avoid the spring winds that we are going to Italy," continued Miss De la Motte; "and I quite expect you will find yourself unable to bear them."

I did not answer her, but I said within myself that I should not make any effort to run away from the spring winds, however cold I might find them. We were to go to town in February, and then I might expect Luigi at any time. I would bear a little frost or a few cold winds for the sake of seeing him. But, then, of course Miss De la Motte knew nothing of all that.

We stayed in the garden, chatting amicably enough, until Charles and James came bringing out the tea and a long wooden table.

"Mrs. Sandys is somewhere in the kitchen-garden," said Rufus; "you had better tell her."

Presently they all came, in very gay spirits and bringing some fruit—downy peaches and luscious nectarines—for me.

"How is the poor, dear invalid?" asked Mrs. Sandys.

"We have not been near him," I answered; "but I was thinking that I might as well take him a cup of tea."

"Yes, dear; I'm sure you are very good to him. Take a couple of these peaches, too; and see if he is well enough to come out here."

So I went off to the house with a cup of tea in one hand and a couple of peaches in the other.

"Asleep?" I asked, as I pushed the door open.

"Yes, I believe I have been," he answered. "What have you there?"

"Tea for your highness and two peaches. How do you feel after the sleep?"

"Vastly improved. Upon my word, Nell, it's as well no one but yourself saw me a couple of hours ago, for I hardly knew what I was saying, and I could not see anything but blue lights and stars."

"Oh, then it did not matter what you said to me?"

"Would anything I said make any difference to you?" he asked, with a great affectation of surprise. "Or would you like me to be more formal with you?"

"Of course not, love," I laughed.

"Would you mind saying that again, Nell?"

"Saying what?"

"Love. You don't know how nice it sounds, and you say it in such a pretty way, too,—'luv.'"

"Did I say 'luv'?" I asked.

"Yes. Nell, darling, what a bore it is to have to go away!"

"Well," I answered, "you know your way back again, don't you? And, Luigi, anyway you will come in February."

"Yes. Or say March at the latest. Now, there is young Rufus," he broke out, fretfully. "What on earth can he want?"

In a moment after he had passed the window Rufus entered the room with a cup of tea in his hand.

"You have a most indefatigable nurse, Prince," he said, with a bright laugh; "for in her anxiety to let you have your tea, she has quite forgotten her own."

"Nell, have you had no tea yourself?" cried Luigi, reproachfully.

"I forgot all about it," I answered, laughingly; "it is very kind of you to bring it for me, Rufus."

"Very. More especially as I had an object in coming into the house."

"Yes? What was that?"

"I came in to laugh. Galatea has got hold of Maurice, and he looks for all the world like an eel in a frying pan. I say, Prince, we're awfully sorry you have to leave us, and for the cause of your recall."

"Thanks, very many. I don't suppose it is anything more serious than usual; at least, I hope not. Yes, it's a great nuisance having to run away just now."

"Still, you know your way to Hutton Royal now," said Rufus, cordially.

"You are very good," Luigi rejoined. "I shall be delighted to come again, if Mrs. Sandys will ask me."

"I say, Nell," said Rufus presently, "suppose you and I drive Prince Ferrari to the station; it will be jolly in the cool of the evening."

"Oh, splendid!" I cried, clapping my hands at the prospect. "But not in the little cart, for it was that which gave him a headache this morning."

"We might have my mother's victoria, without the driving seat; and if Prince Ferrari or you drive going, I will sit behind."

"And what about luggage?" I said, doubtfully.

"George can take a cart. I will attend to that. I will go round and tell them now."

"He is a fine fellow," remarked Luigi, enthusiastically, as the door closed behind Rufus.

"Yes; is it not good of him?" I answered. "Now, shall we join the others on the lawn for a few minutes? If your head is better, that is."

And so we went out to the garden, where the remainder of the party were gathered near the table.

"Don't say anything about Rufus's plan for to-night," I said as we turned the corner of the west wing, "or it may be stopped. Miss De la Motte might want to go herself."

"All right," he answered, just as Mrs. Sandys looked up.

"Oh, Prince," she cried, in tones of genuine regret, "we are so sorry to lose you! Really, I don't know what we shall do without you; and I am so grieved to hear of your mother's illness."

"Indeed, I am very sorry to go," murmured Luigi; whereupon Miss De la Motte looked down pensively, and Lord Maurice, seeing her, positively beamed with delight.

"But I am glad you will be able to stay for dinner. We must have it a little earlier," continued Mrs. Sandys. "There is a train between eight and nine—eight-forty, I believe. We must have a carriage ordered to take you. Rufus, will you see about the carriage for Prince Ferrari?"

"Yes; I have just been to order it."

"Which one?"

"Your victoria. I will drive Prince Ferrari myself to the station."

"That is thoughtful of you. But, Prince, as your visit has been cut short, I hope you will consider that you owe us one still."

"Certainly; I shall be only too delighted to come again, Mrs. Sandys."

"When will you return to England? Next season? Oh, then we may expect to see you in the spring."

And so we stayed chatting until the dressing-bell

reminded us that there is such a thing as dinner, and that dinner must be duly honoured by an improved personal appearance.

"Rufus," I whispered, as we were going towards the house, "what will Mrs. Sandys say to my going, do you think?"

"Oh, I'll square it with her," he answered, easily. "She isn't one of your stiff, old-maidish women."

"Whoever is that?" said a laughing voice behind us.

"Oh, is that you, mother? Well, it was yourself of whom we were speaking. Nell wants to go with us to the station, and, of course, we both wish her to do so; only she is a little afraid of your sense of propriety."

Mrs. Sandys laughed pleasantly.

"Do as you please, child, of course; only I think you had better say nothing about it to the others, or perhaps Winifred will be jealous."

When dinner was over, instead of going into the drawing-room with the others, I ran up to my bedroom, and put on a hat. Then I remembered that I must have a wrap of some kind, so I got out a soft Indian shawl of crimson and gold and wrapped it round me. I stole quietly downstairs and out to the quadrangle, where Rufus and the ponies were waiting.

"If you don't care for the lovely Galatea to see you," he remarked, "you had better go quietly down the avenue to the lodge gate. We can pick you up there."

"Will they all come out?"

"Sure to do so. Very likely Galatea will do a graceful 'weep.' I should not at all wonder."

"I'll go then," I answered.

I could only have missed them by a second or two; for,

before I had got half-way down the avenue, the carriage overtook me.

"I never saw a cleaner shave in all my life," laughed Rufus from behind. "You had just passed through the archway when out they all came."

"Do you want to drive?" asked Luigi, pulling the rug up about me.

"No, I have no gloves," I answered, "and—and I don't care. I want to talk to you; for who knows when I shall see you again?"

"March," he whispered; "and then, if you are still in the same mind, I will speak to Mrs. Sandys."

"Will you? Do you mean it?"

"Of course I do, darling. I only wish you were going back with us now; but you will be brave, my little one, as becomes Fane Ferrers's daughter."

"I will try," I said.

"I know you will, darling. Remember this—well-bred horses are always lasters."

I was silent. We did not seem to quite understand each other. I knew that I had a fair amount of courage and pluck, and more than a fair amount of what is termed in the world's jargon "high-breeding," only I did not, in this case, see the necessity of calling any of those qualities into play. I have carried water to a dog supposed to be mad. I have gone fearlessly up to a horse of vicious notoriety; but I could not face the months to come, without a great, an overwhelming dread. I looked forward to them as to so much unnecessary torture. For all that, the drive through the cool evening air was very pleasant, and I was surprised, when we drew up at the station, to find that it had passed so quickly. There Luigi and I alighted, but Rufus remained, being afraid

to leave the restless ponies. I was thankful for that, for we thus were able to bid farewell without any more inquisitive eyes than those of the railway-porter. It was all over so soon—a kiss, a close hand-clasp, a shrill whistle, and I stood upon the little platform alone. Then I realised that my lover-Prince was gone, but Rufus was waiting.

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## CHAPTER XXV

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### WHAT RUFUS SAID

"Он, come; you look all right!" said Rufus, when I reappeared. "I thought you might perhaps think it necessary to—to——"

"Pipe my eye?" I suggested, as he hesitated.

"Upon my word, Nell, but you have acquired a nice *répertoire* of slang during your short life. Where did you hear it?"

"Chiefly among the art-students in Italy, I suppose," I answered, laughing. "Did Galatea manage to do a little weep, Rufus?"

"No, I can't say she wept, but she—here take the reins a minute, and I'll show you—she put two little white trembling hands out—so, and she faltered 'Good-bye—Prince.'"

"Oh," I said, rather soberly, "was it not all very theatrical?"

"Well, you know, Nell,"—with the usual swaggering contempt of an Englishman for everything and everybody un-English,—“those foreign fellows always do go in for that sort of thing. I'll admit that Ferrari is the nicest fellow, for a foreigner, I ever knew; but, still, he too has a good deal of what my old nurse used to call 'the play-actor' about him."

I felt very blank, for that was not at all what I meant.

"There's one comfort," Rufus continued, "now that

the great luminary has departed,—the lovely Galatea won't stop very long at Hutton Royal."

"Won't she?"

"No, of course not. What would be the good? She doesn't particularly affect me, and Maurice is just terrified by her; so it's of no use wasting powder and shot upon either of us."

"I am sure nobody wants her," I declared; "and as for Prince Ferrari, he certainly was not worth wasting powder and shot over. He would just as soon think of hanging himself as of marrying Miss De la Motte."

"Well, Galatea must look after her affairs," said Rufus, carelessly. "I find my own enough to occupy my thoughts and my time; in fact, Nell, you have never been out of my mind since I left town."

"I!" I cried, in great surprise. "Why have you been thinking about me?"

"I have been thinking," he answered, "that he will be a lucky man who wins you for his wife."

I felt myself blushing, but I looked steadily away into the darkness, over the ponies' heads, and held my tongue.

"I've been thinking," continued Rufus, softly, "of your graceful ways, your soft, silver voice, your dear, dusky eyes, of your true, tender heart, Nell, and I have been wondering not a little if the day would ever come when I should win them all for my own."

I shivered, although the night was warm, and for my very life I could not speak. I tried once, but my tongue clave to the roof of my mouth and my trembling lips refused to utter a single word.

"You said to-day, dear, that you would not wish for a grand place like Scriven? Will Hutton Royal content you?"

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"I cannot, Rufus, indeed, I cannot," I cried, finding my voice at last.

"You cannot!" he echoed. "There is some one else then? You are engaged?"

"No," I answered, faintly. "I am not engaged."

Oh, how I loathed my secret, which would not let me tell the truth about Luigi and myself.

"You think I have spoken too soon, perhaps," he said, eagerly. "I dare say you are right; only, Nell, it seems such a long time since I first learned to love you—I wonder if you remember it? That very first morning when you came into the hall looking so white and ill. Ah, you don't know how my whole heart went out to you at that very first glimpse of your dear little face. Such a forlorn little face it was. It is brighter now, Nell."

"You have been very kind to me," I faltered.

"Kind," he repeated; "you don't know how kind I want to be; how I long to make you happy. You don't know the pleasure it is to serve you. You don't know, Nell dear, how I long to hear you say you love me."

"But I cannot," I cried, desperately, looking at him for the first time.

"Can you not?" he said, blankly. "You don't hate me, do you?"

"Hate you," I answered; "of course not. Who could hate any one who has been as kind as you have been to me? Indeed, I am very fond of you, Rufus,—oh, very. You don't know how much I missed you when you went away; and yet——"

"And yet you can give me nothing more?" he said, sadly.

"Indeed I cannot help it," I replied. "One cannot help one's feelings."

"I suppose not," he answered, coldly; "that must be my excuse for you."

"Rufus, you are not vexed?" I cried, desolately.

It seemed as if my whole world was slipping from me. I did not want to marry Rufus, it is true; still I did not wish to lose my friend.

"Vexed! I suppose," he said, with great bitterness, "that I ought to be very civil and pleasant; but I have always been honest, Nell, both to you and to every one else with whom I have been brought in contact, and I can't make believe that I don't feel your refusal keenly."

I was silent, because I had nothing to say. What could I say to such a stinging speech as that? So I leaned back in the corner of the carriage and we did not exchange a word until we reached home. Even then I did not speak, for Charles came to help me out, and I went in, leaving my hat and wrap in the hall.

The waxen candles were lighted in the drawing-room, and Mrs. Sandys was just pouring out tea which she often had about ten o'clock. Lord Maurice was helping—talking too—and Mrs. De la Motte was sitting near enough to them to join in the conversation. Only Winifred was alone, sitting near a large table on the other side of the room and looking more like Galatea than ever, for she was robed in a garment of some soft, clinging material and looked like a statue.

"Where have you been?" she asked, looking curiously at me. "You never came to wish Prince Ferrari goodbye. I am sure he would be disappointed."

Now, I had not intended to tell her of my expedition to the station, but her tone of patronising possession—possession of Prince Ferrari, if you please—annoyed me beyond endurance; but still I contrived to speak quietly.

"I have been to the station," I said, calmly.

"To—the station!" she echoed. "To see him off?"

"Yes."

"How ve-ry strange!" she remarked, icily.

"Was it? I do not see anything so ve-ry strange in it," I answered, carelessly. "You forget that Prince Ferrari is the oldest friend I have, that he was the dearest friend of my father and my mother."

"Oh, I did not know," she murmured.

"How should you know?" I returned.

After this the fair Galatea bestowed no more little stings about Prince Ferrari upon me, and I went my way in supreme indifference to her and her doings.

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## CHAPTER XXVI

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### AN INSOLENT ENQUIRY

I DID not wake very early the following morning. I dressed slowly. As I went along the corridor I met Galatea's maid carrying a tray, and asked her if Miss De la Motte was unwell.

"Not very well," the girl replied; "a disturbed night and this morning a headache."

Mrs. De la Motte, by the bye, seldom appeared at the first meal of the day, so I was not surprised to find Mrs. Sandys by herself.

"All alone," I laughed; it was only a dreary make-believe sort of a laugh, certainly, but still it was a laugh, and I was rather proud of it.

"Yes," answered Mrs. Sandys, kissing me more kindly even than usual.

"I met Galatea's breakfast on its way," I remarked. "Had a restless night, poor lamb! Oh, those men. Mother dear, they've a great deal to answer for, particularly if they happen to be Florentine Princes."

Mrs. Sandys poured out my coffee without speaking, and then only did I perceive that something was amiss.

"Is anything the matter?" I asked.

"Rufus has gone," she answered.

"Gone," I said, blankly. "Gone where?"

"You may see for yourself," she returned, tossing a tiny note indignantly upon the table.

It ran as follows:

"DEAR MOTHER,—I find I must go up to town to-day before I return to Colchester. Please make my farewells to everybody.

"RUFUS SANDYS."

I read it twice, and then I realised—what? That Luigi had gone—to return I knew not when; and that I had driven Rufus from his home, angry and sore-hearted. I realised that my two lovers had slipped away from me, and I felt very much as I felt when I turned away from dear father's grave,—quite desolate; so desolate that I drooped my head upon my arms and broke into violent weeping, while Mrs. Sandys said nothing.

Presently I looked up, for her silence rather frightened me. I did not know how much she might have seen, or if she had already guessed the cause of her son's departure. She was stirring her tea round and round and round, until it made me dizzy to watch the swiftly whirling liquid.

"Never mind, my darling," she said, kindly, "never mind. It is not worth troubling yourself about."

Then she persistently spoke of other things and would not suffer herself or me to approach the topic upon which both our minds were troubled.

"What are you going to do this morning?" she asked, as I rose from the table.

"Anything you like," I answered, listlessly.

"Well, darling, you see I am obliged to treat you quite as a daughter whilst we have these people here. I cannot help leaving you pretty much to your own devices, for I must be attentive to Mrs. De la Motte, and in a certain degree to Winifred too, more particularly as there is no gentleman here to amuse her."

"There's Lord Maurice," I suggested.

"Oh, Maurice, poor boy," she said, smiling. "I am afraid he and Winifred are hardly so sociable as they might be. If they stay over this week, I must write and ask some one else to amuse her. I dare say Colonel Genny would come."

"Who?" I asked.

"Colonel Wynne-Genny," she answered. "Are you thinking what a strange name it is? So it is; and it looks stranger than it sounds. But he is a most fascinating man, — a most charming man."

"Then perhaps she will fall in love with him." I remarked. "Oh, how I wish she would!"

"Perhaps you will do so yourself," she said, laughingly.

"I think not," I returned, quietly.

"All the same, I will ask him to come. We shall want some amusement whether the De la Mottes stay or not. Of course, Maurice is always here, and that is somebody; but still you and he have not taken to each other as I expected you would."

"I don't think he has ever forgotten the little blunder he made the first time I saw him," I answered; "and he is stupid enough to think I resented it. I'm sure I don't. He did not know; indeed, how could he? And I'm sure it was true enough what he said. Besides, you know, mother, you are his attraction here."

"Nonsense, my dear. Maurice is very fond of me, I know, and I give him good advice and keep him out of mischief, and all that; but as for anything else, why, I'm an old woman now, with a grown-up son; it's utterly absurd."

"Oh, there are a good many 'utterly absurd' things!"

I remarked, wisely. "But that is not one of them. Lord Maurice would not say so either."

"Poor, dear Maurice," she said, pityingly; "he is a nice boy, and I am really very fond of him; but as for anything else, well, well,"—with a sigh. "I never loved but one man in my life, and he was very different from Maurice de Vonne."

"Yes," I echoed; "he certainly was very different."

"Well, child,"—with that quick, impatient sigh, as if she dared not trust herself to wander back into that region of the past,—“you have not answered my question. What are you going to do this morning? I thought we might have the landau this afternoon and drive into the town, but I must take Mrs. De la Motte out, I suppose. Will you ride?"

"Yes, I should like to do so," I answered; "but I must go to the piano for an hour first. What will become of Galatea?"

"She will not appear till luncheon," she replied. "She never does when there are no men staying in the house."

"How awfully rude!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, no; I prefer it. One has not the trouble of entertaining her. And really, Nell, she is not easy to entertain,—for she has no pursuits and scarcely a word to say for herself."

Before I went to the piano I ran to the stables to see Cigarette. I found her in George's hands.

"Bless you!" I cried. "Your bonny satin skin shines like a looking-glass. George, she looks extra well this morning."

"Yes, mum," he answered, stopping and surveying Cigarette critically. "I think as 'ow she do. I think 'ow 'is 'ighness 'ud be satisfied."

"Why, was he not satisfied before?" I asked.

"Yes; but he give me most special orders as 'ow I was to keep her partic'lar smart and clean."

"I'm sure it was kind of him," I laughed. Doubtless Luigi gave George a special "tip" at the same time.

"He was a rare 'un was 'is 'ighness," remarked George, enthusiastically; "he'd only one let-down."

"And what was that?" I asked.

"Well, you know, miss, he was a heavy-weight,—rode sixteen stone, at least; and they're so 'ard to mount."

I felt sure now that the "tip" was special.

"Well, I want Cigarette at eleven," I said; "and be ready yourself."

"Very well, miss."

Then I went back to the house and into the morning-room, in which was the piano I liked best for instrumental music. For singing I preferred that in the hall; besides, the echoes there were so good.

But, although I began in good earnest I could not play. I had neither patience nor inclination; so presently I wandered out into the hall, and, after having glanced at the papers, opened the piano and began singing just as my idle fancy prompted me,—a verse of this, three lines of that, or the whole of the other. At last I slipped almost unconsciously into a simple little story,—a sad little story,—and yet one which from its oft repetition in life has become almost commonplace, despite its pathos and its poetry.

The clock above me chimed eleven, and I sprang up with a start, seeing then that Winifred De la Motte was standing just behind, leaning upon the back of a tall chair of dark oak.

"I've been listening to your pretty song, Miss Ferrars,"

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she said, with a strange little smile flickering about the corners of her hard mouth. "What a particularly accommodating young person your heroine must have been!"

"I never looked at it in that light," I replied.

"No? I believe I am not a poetical person. I always look at everything from a common-sense point of view. I wonder, now, if you would prove as accommodating as the young lady whose woes you were singing a moment ago?"

"I am never likely to be placed in that position," I answered, haughtily.

"I do not know," she said, quietly.

I looked straight into her cold, steel-grey eyes, and my very heart felt chilled, for in that one brief glance I perceived that she knew how things were between Luigi and I.

I went away out of the hall, leaving her still in the same attitude, with the triumphant smile upon her lips and the look of insolent power in her eyes. I wondered if any one in the world hated her as I did.

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## CHAPTER XXVII

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### A LONELY FURROW

THE week which followed was very dull, very hard to live through. I could have borne the dulness, the autumn damps and winds; I could have borne everything and anything but the pain of feeling that Prince Ferrari had forgotten me—that he had forsaken me for Winifred De la Motte. Mrs. Sandys had letters from both of them—that is, from Galatea and her mother—every week, sometimes oftener. She gave them all to me to read, thinking, I dare say, that I took a great interest in them. So I did, an interest infinitely deeper than she knew. I wondered what she would have said if she had known. Well, I am glad now that I never told her. My secret remained my own, save for Galatea's suspicions; and I knew that even she would never be enlightened by Luigi. I was certain of that. Yes, I could trust him that far still.

Well, about the letters from Florence. They came fast enough. "Ill news ever travels apace," I have heard, and, verily, I was able to prove the saying a true one. I read them all; those from "your most affectionate, Mary De la Motte," and filled from beginning to end with rhapsodical confidences about dear Winnie and Prince Ferrari. I never omitted a word of them. It seemed to be all but settled. Prince Ferrari went with them everywhere; dear Winifred was having her por-

trait painted under Prince Ferrari's directions; they had been here, they were going there, all to please Prince Ferrari. That was the general tone of Mrs. De la Motte's epistles. And then there were colder, shorter notes from Winifred herself, who was always in a hurry, as they were just going out with the Prince, or begging her dear Mrs. Sandys to excuse this untidy note. "Prince Ferrari is here and has been chattering unmercifully all the time, and really, you know, that makes it almost impossible to write properly." And so the story went. It was not a new one, I knew it; but it was quite new to me, quite strange, and almost maddening. Sometimes I thought I should not last very long under the suspense and pain. I was growing strangely like what my father was at the last—pale and thin and hollow-eyed, with just one vivid patch of colour on either cheek. Perhaps, I told myself, it would be as well if I were to follow him,—for what is the use of dragging one's life out with no hope, nothing to look forward to in the future, nothing to look back upon in the past but the one word "forsaken."

And thus another month dragged by; and, finally, Mrs. Sandys sent for the doctor; and the doctor, after asking a few questions and prescribing a tonic, which, by the bye, I had not the smallest intention of taking, ordered me change of air.

"Where would you like to go, Nell?" Mrs. Sandys asked, when he had gone.

I answered listlessly that I did not want to go anywhere; I liked Hutton Royal best. But she would not listen.

"Hutton Royal is all very well, but at times it is apt to be depressing; more especially if you are not in very

good spirits, which you are not. Oh, it's of no use to attempt to disguise it from me, Nell. I have eyes, child, and I do not keep them shut."

I turned my hot face away in silence, and she continued:

"Now, go away we must; so there is no more to be said about it. The only question is, where shall we go?"

Some wild longing in my heart leapt up, crying "Florence," but I stifled its glad, fresh voice with a relentless hand. If he was to be won by such means, I did not care to win him; and yet I knew that I would fall down and kiss the ground beneath his feet if he were only here. My darling, my noble, brave, perfect love; my king among men; my only one, real, great, false love!

"Where shall we go?" repeated Mrs. Sandys. "Are you anxious to see more of England or shall we go abroad?"

"I do not care," I answered. In truth, I dared not trust myself to choose; and so she chose Devonshire. I was sorely tempted to cry out wildly to be taken to Italy,—bright, sunny, lovely Italy; but pride got the better of impulse, and I allowed the preparations for our journey to continue without remonstrance.

At first she was somewhat exercised in her mind as to whether a house or an hotel would be the more pleasant for us; and finally, as she believed me to be in want of rousing, she decided in favour of an hotel. I was delighted. It would be such a relief to get away from pompous Charles and obsequious James, and have a few fussy waiters again; it would be like going back to the old days when I did not want rousing.

"I have written to tell Rufus of our plans," she said one morning; "and I have told him to join us if he can get leave; at all events, he might come over for a day or two, if he cannot remain longer. I shall ask him to spend his long leave with us in Devon, if we are still there."

"How long are we going to stay?" I asked, listlessly.

"Until you are quite recovered," she answered. "Nell, that medicine does not seem to do you any good. It has not improved your appetite at all."

That was not surprising, seeing that I had never tasted it; but I did not tell her so. I only said, "Not at all," and let her think what she chose.

"I hope Rufus will come," she remarked presently.

"So do I," I said, quietly.

"Yes, I shall be very much annoyed if he does not do so," she went on, after a moment's pause. "I cannot imagine, for my part, what possesses the boy."

- I, who knew perfectly well what possessed him, gave a great guilty start, and improved the occasion by flushing, until my face felt like a great overripe cherry.

"Well," she said, turning the subject abruptly, "I shall not be the worse for a change myself. I believe there is something wrong about the drainage of this place—I have had a headache for three days."

"You do look ill," I said.

"I feel so, dear. I am not and never was a very strong woman, and I have felt greatly fatigued lately. I shall be all the better for a change."

I hoped she might be. For myself, I did not believe any change would make the least difference to me. I did not

care to have any difference made. I bethought me of the song which says,—

“Men must work, and women must weep;  
And the sooner 'tis over, the sooner to sleep!”

If only I could be asleep and at rest! If we could lay our burdens down and slip out of life when we should like, how many a life would be ended earlier than it is! But that we may not do. “They grind exceedingly small,” and we must go on with the weary round of life until the task is done. Once having put our hand to the plough, there is no looking back. On we must go, and on we do go, some of us bravely taking the toils, the aches, and the pains without a murmur, and some of us with faltering footsteps and fainting spiritless hearts, always longing to lie down and die before the end of the furrow is reached. I felt, with a great sense of shame, that I was of these latter.

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## CHAPTER XXVIII

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### A THUNDERBOLT

"HERE is the answer from Rufus," said Mrs. Sandys when she came down the following morning. "Read it, dear. My eyes ache so, I cannot read it." So I read the letter aloud. It ran,—

"MY DEAR MOTHER,—It is utterly impossible for me to get over to Hutton Royal this week, but my long leave commences on Thursday, a week to-morrow, when I will join you anywhere you like, if such an arrangement will suit you. Please let me know as soon as possible that I may answer several invitations I have received. I am very sorry to hear of Nell being so seedy. I hope it is nothing to do with her lungs that has made you think of taking her to Devonshire. I should have come over for an hour or two, but Scott, you remember him, has gone to see his young woman off to the south of France, and no one but me would do his duty for him. Of course, he has just had a fortnight's leave, but, poor chap, one couldn't refuse to enable him to have a last look at her, at least I couldn't. And so you quite understand the reason why I cannot get over to see you before you start. Will you let me know if Nell is going to take Cigarette? If she is, I will bring a horse too. I suppose she is not too ill to ride.

"Your affectionate son,

"RUFUS."

"A very nice letter," she said, when I had read it all.

"Very," I said, cheerfully, for it made me feel quite bright; it did not seem as if everyone had deserted me.

"I think, dear, you must answer him for me. You will take Cigarette, of course,"—I do not believe she ever gave Cigarette a thought before,—“and George will have to go too. What are you going to do this morning?”

“Nothing particular. I’ll ride, if you don’t want me.”

She looked pleased, despite her heavy, tired appearance. As I had never once proposed a ride during the last month, I dare say she thought me already roused, and possibly connected it with the letter I had just read.

“I think I shall go and lie down again,” she said, wearily, pushing her untouched plate away distastefully. “I don’t know what is the matter with me, but I never had such a headache in my life.”

“You have taken cold,” I suggested.

“I must have done, for my throat is sore too,” she replied.

“Let me call at Doctor Morley’s,” I said, persuasively.

“No, no, child,” she said, trying to laugh; “that would be foolish. Oh, it is nothing but a cold. I shall be better in a day or two.”

My experience of illness had not been very great, although father was an invalid so long; but, ignorant as I was, I determined all the same that I would call and ask Doctor Morley to look in and see what this headache and sore throat might mean.

I did not have to call, however, for just as I reached the entrance to the village I met him in his dog-cart, and he pulled up.

“I am glad to see this,” he said, cheerily; “a ride will do you more good than all my medicine.”

“I am sure of that,” I answered. “But, doctor, I wish you would go up to the house.”

"Yes? Nobody ill, I hope."

"I don't know. Mrs. Sandys is very queer," I replied. "She seems as if she cannot hold her head up, and she complains this morning of a sore throat."

"Indeed. I'll look in and see what is the matter."

"Very well; only don't tell her I sent you. I wanted to come for you an hour ago, and she would not let me."

"All right." And then we went our different ways.

I went for a short ride. My back did not feel very strong; but that was not surprising, considering how little I had eaten during the past few weeks. On my way through the village I had to pass the doctor's house, and a sharp tapping on one of the windows made me look up and stop. It was the doctor himself who came out bareheaded to speak to me.

"My dear young lady," he said, "I am very glad you told me to look in this morning."

"Why? Is she going to be ill?" I asked in alarm.

"I'm afraid she has scarlet fever," he said, gravely. "I should strongly advise you not to go back, but to stop at the rectory for a few days."

"Oh, I really couldn't," I answered, decidedly; "I must go straight back at once."

"You must not go near Mrs. Sandys's room," he said, imperatively. "I absolutely forbid it; in your weakened state, any attempt at nursing her would probably cost you your life."

I smiled. How little I should mind that!

"And there is another thing," he continued. "For my part, I do not care for amateur nursing. Old Bessy will attend to her properly until we can get trained nurses from London. You would do more harm than good."

"Is she going to be very ill, doctor?" I asked.

"No, I trust not; still, even in the mildest form of scarlet fever, we cannot be too careful to prevent the malady spreading. Don't you see, my dear child, Mrs. Sandys might have it very mildly indeed, and get over it in no time, and you might take it from her and die. In these cases everything depends upon the constitution of the patient and the state of health in which the complaint was taken."

"I see," I answered, thoughtfully.

"Then you will not attempt to go into her room," he said, anxiously.

"No, not in direct opposition to your orders. I am not quite a fool, doctor."

"There's a good girl," he said, approvingly.

"Then am I to tell Rufus? I have to write to him this morning."

"Yes, tell him, by all means; but I would not send for him whilst there is no danger."

"And there is Mrs. Delaney. What about her?"

"Where is she?"

"At Ems, I believe."

"You might write and tell her. Say you will write and let her know regularly how Mrs. Sandys goes on."

"Very well."

"And you'll remember what I say about keeping away? By the bye, do you sleep near her?"

"The next room."

"The next room? Then move at once into the next wing."

I promised him that I would do so, and I moved away, thinking that for a doctor he was making an awful amount of fuss about a mild attack of fever. To be sure, I did not know very much about scarlet fever, and

he might be afraid of my taking it while I was so listless and weak; but to me it did seem absurd that, although we breakfasted together that morning, I might not even be in the next room to hers. However, I supposed he knew best.

The first person I met when I got back was old Bessy, the aged woman who had nursed Rufus and his mother before him.

"Eh, Missy," she exclaimed, "but this is a bad business!"

"Is Mrs. Sandys going to be very ill?" I asked.

"I doubt she is," she answered, gravely.

It was rather a different statement from Doctor Morley's, but I comforted myself by thinking that poor people seem to take a pleasure in making the very worst of everything.

I wrote at once to Rufus, telling him the news, and also to Mrs. Delaney. And then for the rest of the day I wandered about, wishing I had something or anything to do, which, unfortunately, I had not. I sent George with the letters to Chelmsford, that they might catch the mid-day post; and later in the day I received a telegram from Rufus, saying he would be over on Saturday afternoon, —on duty Thursday and Friday, he said. Thus Thursday passed away.

Friday dragged by in the same dreary way. I did not like to ride or drive, though Doctor Morley recommended me to do so. Instead, I dawdled aimlessly about, listening to the reports brought me by the women servants from the east wing. The doctor's report was not so favourable, and old Bessy said plainly that the mistress was very ill indeed. I wished that they would let me see her. Once, indeed, I did try to steal into the sick-

room, but old Bessy, meeting me just at the gallery door, shut it and put her back against it.

"Now go away to bed, Missy," she said, firmly; "it won't do no good. The mistress doesn't miss you; so go away, my honey."

What could I do but go? I went to bed, though I did not sleep much; and then I had to get up again.

And so I came down to my solitary breakfast, with no desire to eat and no interest in the letters and papers which lay upon the table. Charles had put the *Queen* beside my plate, thinking probably that I, like his mistress, would be eager for the fashions and the latest chit-chat. I took it up listlessly and glanced through the first article, almost without knowing what it was about. I read a few of the queries and answers, and then I glanced carelessly through the list of fashionable marriages.

"A marriage has been arranged between his highness Prince Ferrari and Winifred, only daughter of the late Geoffrey De la Motte, Esq., of Scriven Park, Yorkshire."

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## CHAPTER XXIX

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### THE SHADOW OF DEATH

THEY say anything is better than suspense, but I am not so sure about it. "While there is life there is hope," and hope is sweet; but when death comes, it is all over. So was it with me. The end of my dream had come, but I had hoped up to the very end.

I hardly realised it at first. I leaned my head upon my hands and wished that I could cry. I wondered if I ever should. I was cold and numb as I sat trying to realise it all. Was he saying all the tender things to her that he used to say to me? Did they laugh and joke together as we used to do? No—no—they have not the happy past to fall back upon as we had. I wondered if she still made his head ache as she did that day he drove her to Witham Hill. How distinctly I remembered it! How he abused her afterwards. How could he do it—how could he play such a double, deceitful game, as he did with both of us? Perhaps he made fun of me to her, and spoke of me in the careless, disdainful way he did then of her. I shut my teeth with an angry click, and wished then I could hate him, but I could not—I could not. No! Even though I knew that he had forsaken me for Winifred De la Motte, though he had broken his promises, thrown away his honour, proved himself untrustworthy, unstable, untrue, I loved him still; loved him

as I knew I should never find it in my heart to love any other man on this side the grave.

I wondered what dear father would say if he could come back. Poor darling daddy, he would have trusted his little Nell's whole happiness in Prince Ferrari's keeping—just as I had done—and lost it!

I took the miniature from about my neck, and, going up to my room, I locked it away. I could not bear to wear it now; I almost hated the sight of it. I had worn it every day since that afternoon when he gave it to me; but now I knew I should clasp it about my neck and kiss it for the giver's sake never more.

I got through the morning somehow, and sat down to my solitary luncheon, which I did not eat. Mrs. Sandys was worse,—“talking all sorts of nonsense,” the maid told me, and they had cut off all her beautiful hair. How I longed for Rufus to come!

I drove to meet him at Hutton Station. I was so restless and unhappy that I could not settle to anything, and I had no doubt Rufus would be glad to see me. The ponies had not been out for a week, excepting for exercise, and my weak wrists had as much as they could do to manage them.

“All alone!” exclaimed Rufus when he appeared.

“Yes,” I answered. “Will you drive home, Rufus? My wrists are so weak.”

He got into the carriage, and the porter brought out his portmanteau and delivered it to the care of the groom, and then we moved towards home.

“And so the *mater* is seedy,” he said, lightly.

“Seedy!” I exclaimed. “She's got scarlet fever, and very badly. She was delirious this morning, and they have cut off all her beautiful hair.”

"By jove, you don't say so!" he said in astonishment. "I thought she'd just got a little mild attack and would probably be all right by this time."

"Oh, dear, no. The doctor said at first that he hoped it would only be in a mild form, but old Bessy said from the beginning that she was very ill."

"Poor mother!" he said, softly. Then, after a minute, "You only look very so-so, Nell. What have you been doing with yourself?"

I flushed hotly enough then, turning my head away and muttering something about being "out of sorts."

"And I was so cross to you the last time that I was at home," he said, penitently; "like the brute I am. Well, I won't be cross any more, little friend."

"Oh, don't, don't!" I cried, passionately. "You cannot tell how it has troubled me. It seemed as if everything was slipping away out of my grasp that I loved most. You don't know, Rufus, how miserably unhappy I am."

"Are you, dear? I wish I could help you."

"But you cannot," I said, wearily; "no one can do that, I fear. Only don't quarrel with me again, Rufus."

"Then you are glad I have turned up again," he remarked presently.

"Very," I answered, candidly. "Oh, the last two days, they have been awful. You have no idea how terrible they have been. Fancy being in that great house all by myself. I couldn't touch the piano, I was too tired to ride much, and they have never let me go near your mother's room. Of course we dared not allow a visitor to enter. Every one was sent away at the lodge gates; and I dared not go near the rectory for fear of taking the fever there."

"Poor little Nell!" he said, pityingly. "It has been hard lines for you. It's quite right, though, that they have kept you out of harm's way. I am very glad they had so much sense. I don't suppose you'd have done any good at all, and I'm sure my mother would be the first to tell you to keep away."

In the days that followed I could not help contrasting Rufus Sandys with Prince Ferrari, and the comparison was not altogether favourable to the latter. I wished I could make myself love Rufus. He was so true, so loyal in his unswerving love, so unobtrusive, so careful of me. He did everything for me, and for his mother, too. He wrote daily to his aunt, Mrs. Delaney, or rather to her husband; for, in answer to my letter we had received a telegram announcing the birth of a daughter, and also telling us that she must not be told yet awhile of her sister's illness. Nevertheless, Rufus wrote the latest news every day to her husband; he attended to everything, and, refusing to be shut out of his mother's room, spent half his days and most of his nights with her.

And during this time I never saw Mrs. Sandys once. They told me that she would not know me, that there was no use running the risk, and that, when she first heard what was the nature of her illness, she said, "Keep Miss Ferrers away; she is not strong, poor child."

She had been ill ten days when I asked Rufus to let me go in and see her.

"Certainly not," he answered, decidedly.

"Why not?"

"What would be the good? You would not know her, and she knows nothing and nobody."

"Has she never recognised you?"

"I believe she had an idea once who it was, but she has not spoken intelligibly since I came."

"Will she get better, Rufus?" I asked, scarcely liking to frame the thought in words.

"I do not know," he said, very gravely.

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## CHAPTER XXX

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### THE VERY WORST

"I WISH Aunt Nora could have come," said Rufus, anxiously, whilst we were at breakfast the following morning.

"So do I," I rejoined.

"Because," he continued, "there should be some woman here to take charge of everything."

"I'll do my best," I said, meekly.

"Yes, dear, I know; but I'm thinking there may be much more to do than there is just now, and you should have some lady here with you."

I knew what he meant,—that if his mother died I ought not to be left alone in the house with him.

"I don't know any one in England," I said, rather forlornly; "and I was afraid to let the rectory girls come, although they offered to do so."

"Of course not. Besides, it should be a married lady. Aunt Nora ought to have been here; but of course that is out of the question. Well, I always thanked Providence that we had so few relatives, but I wish now that we had one or two more. I wonder if Mrs. De la Motte would come?"

"They are in Italy," I answered, quietly.

"Then she is out of the question, too. I wonder if we could ask one of our married ladies? There's Mrs.

Adare. No, there are children, and she'd be afraid for them. And there's Mrs. Joyliffe; they's on leave, abroad somewhere. I'll tell you what, Nell. Our paymaster's wife would come,—Mrs. Doyle. She's a delightful woman, and has no children to think of."

"Ask her, then," I said, willingly. "I'm sure I should be glad of any one."

"I'll write to her presently."

In answer to this letter there came a telegram from Mrs. Doyle: "Coming by eleven o'clock train."

"The very thing," Rufus exclaimed, after reading it. "I'm sure it's very good of her."

"More than good," I cried.

"You'll go yourself to meet her, Nell; the drive will do you good."

"Cannot you come?"

"I shouldn't like to leave the house to-day," he answered. And so I knew that Mrs. Sandys was very ill indeed.

At this time I thought very little of Luigi and Winifred De la Motte, for Mrs. Sandys occupied my thoughts entirely. It was very dismal. The servants crept about the house with scared faces and gathered in little groups to whisper the details of the last symptoms or the latest report from Doctor Morley. Rufus was nearly all that day in his mother's room, and above and around and in the midst of everything there hung that awful gloom and sense of oppression which never comes except in the house where one lies sick unto death.

Oh, the relief it was getting out into the fresh air again! Not that it was particularly fresh, for it was a soft, murky November, with much fog; still the drive was a relief after that great house, where no one spoke

above a whisper and where all seemed to glide about like ghosts.

I did not get out of the carriage at the station, but waited for Mrs. Doyle at the gate. I did not want to see any one else, and people, who did not know that I had never even seen the patient since her illness began, might be timid, and so frighten themselves into having the fever.

The train came in as we drove up, so I had scarcely a moment to wait before Mrs. Doyle came out. She was kind and friendly, and got into the open carriage with outstretched hands and eager words of sympathy on her lips.

"My dear, I said the very moment I read Mr. Sandys's sad letter, that I must come at once," she said.

"It is very good of you," I answered. "Rufus did not like me to be left quite alone."

"Of course not. And how is she? Better?"

"I don't think so," I replied, shaking my head, while two great tears fell upon the gentle hands which held my own.

"She is not going to die?" she said, quickly. "It is not so bad as that?"

"Rufus thinks so," I said, slowly; "at least, he said this morning that after awhile there might be a good deal to do, and I ought to have somebody with me."

Mrs. Doyle turned her head away sharply, and I could see that her whole frame was shaken with sobs.

"She is one of the most kind and charming women I ever met," she said presently, in a choking voice.

I did not answer her, for indeed my own tears were flowing fast, and I wept on hopelessly during the whole drive home. You see, I was not very strong, and I had

kept back my tears so long that now they had once begun to flow they would not be stopped. When we reached the lodge gates, however, I sat up and dried my eyes, and then I noticed that the gates had been left wide open, which was somewhat unusual.

"Stop," I called to the coachman, just as we were passing through. "The lodge blinds are down. What does it mean?"

The coachman pulled the horses up, and James got down to enquire. I sat holding Mrs. Doyle's hand very tightly indeed, and scarcely daring to breathe lest I should miss what Mrs. Bates might have to say in reply. She came out to the door of the carriage.

"She's gone, Miss Ferrers," she said, with quivering lips; "we sha'n't have her bonny, bright face coming by no more."

"Go on," I said, mechanically, and without speaking to the woman. "Be quick."

In less than five minutes we drove under the archway into the quadrangle and drew up at the great entrance. How dismal the huge red-brick pile looked! Every blind was down; there was not a sign of life about the place. It looked like a mansion of the dead. Ah, I had forgotten, it was a mansion of the dead!

Charles opened the door; and then Rufus, with a strangely white face, ran down the steps to meet us. He clasped Mrs. Doyle's hand for a moment before he opened the carriage door.

"This is kind of you," he said, warmly. "I don't know how to thank you sufficiently for coming."

She got out and went into the house without speaking, and Rufus turned to me.

"Come, dear," he said, gently.

"Is she dead, Rufus?" I asked; "really dead?"

"I will tell you all about it in the house, dear," he answered, persuasively.

"I haven't anybody left to care for me now," I said, forlornly, and making no effort to stir. "What will the place be like without her?"

I looked helplessly from him to Charles. I noticed that Charles, the irreproachable, the immovable, the stolid, was crying quietly, every now and again dashing away the tears with his hand.

"Come into the house, dear," repeated Rufus, kindly. And so I got out of the carriage and followed him.

Mrs. Doyle was talking in the hall to the housekeeper and old Bessy, but the latter came to meet me.

"Eh, my honey," she said, sadly, "I've lost my bonny bright lassie. I don't know what we'll do without her. I doubt me it's a bad day for Hutton Royal that's it's lost the bonny mistress."

"And you never let me go to see her," I said, reproachfully, "never once."

"Best not, Missy. It isn't herself she's like now."

Then the housekeeper took Mrs. Doyle up to her room, and I followed Rufus into the morning-room.

"It seems to me, Nell," he said, sadly, taking my hand in his, "that we must be very good to each other now."

"I have no one but you," I answered, wearily, "no one else in the whole world. I believe there is some awful fate following me; you will go or change next."

"No, dear, no," he said, in soothing tones.

"Did she know you, Rufus?" I asked.

"Just after you left she half-opened her eyes, and I

fancy she recognised me, and I fancy she murmured something like 'Did it for the best;' so from that I thought she must have been wandering. The last hour she was quite unconscious."

"When—when was it?"

"About half an hour ago, dear."

I asked no more, and he told me nothing further. It was evident that he was feeling his mother's death very keenly. He was not the child of the man she loved, and she could never quite forget it, but Rufus himself had forgotten all that. During the last few days he had come out nobly. Indeed, Rufus Sandys had nothing to reproach himself with; if he should live to be ninety he would be able to look back upon his mother's last illness without a regret for himself, knowing that he had done the best he could. And it was not only I who thought so. Every one in the house said the same thing, from Doctor Morley himself down to old Bessy; and I was fain to acknowledge that of all my lovers Rufus Sandys was the most desirable, and yet I did not desire him at all. I wondered why I could not care for him the best. He was honest and true and tender, and I knew that if I were to put my life and my happiness into his keeping he would guard them right royally and well.

Never once during the three days which elapsed between the death of his mother and the funeral did Rufus allude to anything like an engagement between us. He had a great deal to do, and yet he was never so busy but that he was able to look after me, to see that I was comfortable, to take me into the gardens for half an hour, and, in short, to care for me. At each hour of the day I had some fresh proof of his kind and unobtrusive

love, his watchful care; and Mrs. Doyle was emphatic in her praise of him.

"The dearest boy I ever knew," she always ended; "so kind, so good, so tender." And my own heart re-echoed it all; and yet I could not enthrone him in that innermost recess, where Prince Ferrari had always reigned, and where I knew he would reign until I died.

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## CHAPTER XXXI

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### A REMOTE CONTINGENCY

"NELL, dear," said Rufus to me on the morning of the funeral day, "I have something to tell you."

"Well?" I said.

"You know, dear, that your father appointed my mother your guardian."

"Yes; I have not even a guardian now," I remarked, forlornly.

"Yes, my dear child. He provided a guardian in case of mother's death."

"Really! Who is she?"

"It is not a lady, dear. It is Prince Ferrari."

"What?" I repeated, stupidly.

"In case of my mother's death, your father left a paper to be opened at once. In that he appoints Prince Ferrari your guardian."

"Oh, save me from that, save me from that, Rufus!" I wailed, sinking down in my agony on my knees at his feet. "Oh, dear, dear Rufus, save me from that, and I will do anything you ask me. If you ever loved me, don't let me go to him."

"My darling child," he said, in astonished tones, "I thought Ferrari was a friend of yours. I thought you liked him."

"Like him," I repeated; "no, I don't think I ever

liked him. Go to live with them I won't; so there is no more to be said. You won't let them take me away, will you, Rufus?"

"There is only one way in which you could remain with me, Nell," he said, gravely, "and that position you have already refused."

"Yes, I know," I answered, hiding my face.

"And of course you cannot remain here any length of time. I dare say Mrs. Doyle might stay a few weeks, and then you might go to her for awhile; but you know, Nell, you cannot live here, except as my wife. If you will consent to that, Heaven knows I will do my utmost to make you as happy as possible; and if the fact that I shall worship the very ground under your feet will make you so, I think you will be happy with me. What do you say, Nell?"

"Don't send me away," I whispered; "I shall go out of my mind if you send me away."

"Send you away," he repeated, tenderly. "My dearest, does a man send away what is most precious to him in the world? Nell, would she have been pleased, do you think? I think she would, she was so fond of you?"

"It was the great wish of her life," I answered, dreamily.

"Poor mother!" he said, regretfully. "And it has come just too late to tell her."

I, who knew that if she had lived it would never have come to pass, said nothing, but I felt despicable. Alas, I so often felt like that! Well, I determined that some day I would tell Rufus all about it. Just then I was positively afraid to do so, lest he should take back his word and I be left to my guardian. That would be more than I was capable of bearing, and I made up my

mind that I should make no attempt to do so. As for living in the same house with Prince Ferrari and Winifred as his wife,—well, it might be the particular furrow that I ought to plough to the very end, but I was not going to do it. I could just imagine Galatea's cold steel-grey eyes flashing their scornful glances at me every time Luigi addressed her by any tender name, but I had no mind to afford her so much gratification. I had no mind to stand calmly by and look on while he played the part of Pygmalion to her Galatea. As I have said before, there are some of us who follow the ploughshare of our afflictions manfully, bravely, uncomplainingly, to the very end; there are some who go with faltering footsteps and weary, spiritless hearts; and now and then there are a few who make a stand and flatly refuse to plough some particular furrow: that was my case. Likely enough, this was one given to me that I might turn aside and do that which yesterday I was not willing to do. It is often in so strange a way that the great events of our life are brought about.

The house was not so quiet that morning as it had been during the last three days. Although Mrs. Sandys had no near female relative except her sister, Mrs. Delaney, there were several men of the Sandys and Fairfax families who arrived during the course of the morning, and the luncheon party would not be a very small one. Just after eleven o'clock, however, while Rufus and I were still in the morning-room, the door opened and Charles ushered in Lord Maurice de Vonne—Lord Maurice, haggard, travel-stained, careworn, with dark shadows under his brown eyes; not the trim, spruce Lord Maurice I had been accustomed to see, but a heart-broken man.

"Maurice, my dear chap," cried Rufus, holding out his hand.

"Is it true?" he said, hoarsely. "I can't believe it."

"Yes, it is quite true," answered Rufus, simply.

"Could nothing be done? How was it you could not pull her through?" he asked, with feverish impatience; but continued, without waiting for an answer, "you remember, Nell, how loth I was to go away; but my mother was ill and Ethel was there alone, so I didn't like to refuse when they sent for me. I have travelled night and day since I got your telegram. Why didn't you send for me earlier, when there was any danger? You both knew how I worshipped her."

"My dear Maurice," said Rufus, kindly, "it would have been no good. She was taken ill on Thursday,—Thursday week, that is,—and I came on Saturday as soon as I could get off; but she never knew even me."

"Then she left me no message; she died without leaving me a word," said Lord Maurice, desolately.

"Without a word for *any one*," answered Rufus.

"I can see her, I suppose?"

Rufus shook his head.

"Too late. No one has seen her, except myself and the people who laid her in her coffin."

"Not even that," he murmured, leaning his elbow upon the chimney-shelf and hiding his face against his arm.

"Wine and something to eat," I whispered; "he has been travelling all night."

Rufus disappeared, and Lord Maurice turned to me.

"Did not you see her, Nell?"

"Not since the morning the doctor first visited her,"

I answered. "Rufus would not let me; he said she was not at all like herself."

He was silent a moment; then broke out again.

"Of course, I knew she would never have married me; but no one knows how I loved her," he said, passionately. "I have simply worshipped her ever since I was a child."

"She was very fond of you, Lord Maurice," I replied; "she thought a great deal of you."

"Yes, I think she did," he said, sadly.

"I am certain of it. Only that morning, the very last time I saw her," I answered, tearfully, "when we were speaking of going into Devonshire, she said an hotel would be better than a furnished house, because of Rufus and Maurice."

"Did she say that? Then she expected me to come?"

"Oh, dear, yes," I replied, for I was anxious to give him all the comfort I could.

Then Rufus returned, and Charles came after him, carrying a tray with meat and wine, which Lord Maurice declared resolutely he would not touch.

"Then you shall not go to the funeral," said Rufus, firmly, a threat which made him obey at once.

"Are you two alone here?" asked Lord Maurice.

"Mrs. Doyle is here," answered Rufus. "She came at once when they heard of my mother's illness; and very kind it was too, for Nell, as you probably know, has been very much out of sorts, and I was thankful to have someone here with her."

"How long has she been here?"

"Since the day she died. I insisted upon Nell going to meet her at the station, and when they returned it was all over."

"Did she suffer much?" asked Lord Maurice, anxiously.

"Not then, no. I think she knew me once, just about two o'clock, for she muttered something about 'did it for the best,' and she looked as if she knew me."

"I wonder what?" said Lord Maurice, dreamily.

"It is not of much consequence. I am sure she did everything for the best—always." And, dearly as I loved Mrs. Sandys, I could not but own that it was very generous of Rufus to say so.

"Always!" cried Lord Maurice, warmly.

At this moment Rufus was called away, and Lord Maurice asked:

"Who nursed her?"

"There were two trained nurses from London besides her old nurse Bessy, and Rufus," I answered. "And, oh, Lord Maurice, he has been so good! Nobody knows but the doctor and the people in the house how devoted he has been. He scarcely left her at all from the first; and for the last three days he came down only to meals. I don't know how he has kept up so long nor where he learned to become such a splendid nurse. Poor old Bessy is almost heart-broken."

"So am I," he said, disconsolately. "So am I."

"What is the matter, Rufus?" I asked as he came back into the room.

"It's that brute Lawrence," he said, in a vexed tone; "and of all the insolent, consequential cads I ever met with, I think he is the very worst. Really, any one would think Hutton Royal belonged to him, instead of to me."

"Why, what did he say?" I asked.

"Asked after you in the most free and easy manner. By Jove, I'd like to break his head for him."

"Rufus!" I cried, reproachfully.

"Oh, I forgot, dear," he said, penitently. "But, all the same, I am sure that mother would have been furious if she had heard him. By Jove, he had to keep his place with her."

The great brass clock in the hall was striking four as we re-entered the house, and then Rufus told me that I must go and take my hat and coat off, and that I might come down into the dining-room to hear the will read.

"Must I come?"

"I think so, dear. You will probably be mentioned in it; and that paper of your father's must be read also."

Just as I was going upstairs, Mr. Lawrence came hastily in.

"Miss Ferrers must be present at the reading of the will," he said, authoritatively.

"Miss Ferrers will be present," returned Rufus, curtly.

Rufus was very good. He waited in the hall for me, and took me into the dining-room himself, giving me a chair next to his own at the table.

"Will you read the document left by the late Mr. Ferrers first," he said, civilly, handing Mr. Lawrence a paper as he spoke.

The lawyer took it silently and unfolded it, then read aloud:

"In case of the death of my daughter's guardian, Mrs. Sandys, I hereby appoint Prince Ferrari, of the Villa Ferrari, Florence, as her guardian and sole trustee. Fane Ferrers."

I heard it with less pain than I had expected. It was

so very short and was worded so formally that it did not sound like dear father's composition at all. Moreover, my attention was attracted by the lawyer's peculiar manner. He had unfolded the will, which was rather bulky, and was looking at us—that is, at Rufus and me—in the strangest manner imaginable. He coughed once or twice and made a great rustling with the paper, but he did not immediately begin.

"Well, sir?" said Rufus, impatiently.

"Ahem!" He coughed again, then set the paper straight, and began the usual legal preamble, setting forth that Helen Sandys was of sound mind, and so forth. First, there were legacies of fifty pounds a year for life to Charles, to old Bessy, and to Mrs. Soames, the housekeeper. Five hundred pounds to each of her executors, of whom there were three,—Lord Maurice de Vonne, Mr. George Fairfax, and Sir John Ellevaine. A thousand pounds to Mrs. Delaney, a thousand pounds to her goddaughter and niece Helen Delaney, fifty pounds to Doctor Morley, and a year's wages to every servant in the house at the time of her death. Mr. Lawrence made another pause, then began reading again, very slowly and impressively, to this effect:

"If my dear adopted daughter, Geraldine Ferrers, should be still unmarried when she has attained the age of twenty-one, I give and bequeath to her the residue of my estate, both real and personal. If, however, before that age, she should become my son's wife, I desire to give the whole of my property to him on the day of the marriage, subject to an annuity of one thousand pounds to the said Geraldine Ferrers. My jewels, furs, and lace I leave to Geraldine Ferrers absolutely."

"And that is the whole of the will," said Mr. Law-

rence, looking straight at Rufus. "That is all," he repeated.

"Well, sir, I hear you," said Rufus, coldly.

"It isn't just," remarked a voice from among the men at the farther end of the room.

"Hush!" returned Rufus, sternly. "This will is perfectly just. I am more than satisfied with it."

I saw a perfect blaze of friendliness come into Lord Maurice's eyes, and then Rufus spoke again.

"Our friends here may like to know," he said, "that my dear mother's wishes have been fulfilled: Miss Ferrers has already promised to marry me."

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## CHAPTER XXXII

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### POOR NELL!

OF course I have only given you the outline of Mrs. Sandys's will. It set forth in due legal language all manner of provisions and trusts. There was provision made for my maintenance until I came of age or married; there was provision for Rufus during the same period; there was another provision for the keeping up of the mansion; and I found that I was free to live in it if I chose to do so. The whole document was extremely complicated, but the principal fact was plain enough—which was to the effect that if I did not marry Rufus the whole property became absolutely my own. I did not approve of it; I knew that it was not just.

"Is there any need for me to remain longer?" I said to Rufus.

"Certainly not, my darling. The whole business is over now," he answered. "Come into the boudoir."

"Yes, I want to talk to you," I said.

We were not, however, free to retire just then, for one or two of the gentlemen announced that they must return to town; and they took leave of me in a ceremonious manner which made me wretched.

"Will you all wait a few moments?" I said, suddenly.

They bowed stiffly and remained standing. I noticed that not one of them sat down.

"I wanted to tell you," I said, nervously, "that I knew nothing whatever of Mrs. Sandys's intentions."

They bowed again, and I went on, seeing that no one helped me out by a single word.

"If I had known, I should have entreated her to leave it otherwise—that is, to its rightful owner, Mr. Rufus Sandys."

"Undoubtedly Rufus is the rightful owner," remarked his uncle, very stiffly. "We cannot understand how Mrs. Sandys was induced to make such a will."

"I beg you won't imply that Miss Ferrers *induced* my mother one way or the other," interrupted Rufus, hotly.

"Do not quarrel over it," I said, in imploring tones. "I beg you will not make matters worse for me."

"No," remarked Lord Maurice; "let Miss Ferrers speak for herself, Rufus. Don't be frightened, Miss Ferrers; tell them all how the mistake rose."

He was so jealous of Mrs. Sandys's honour, and Rufus was so jealous for mine, that they came forward and stood on either side of me, two brave champions, one for the dead, the other for the living.

"I will tell you," I said, simply. "Mrs. Sandys was very anxious that Rufus and I should marry, and, unfortunately, she got the mistaken idea that he was unwilling, and so I supposed she made the will to—to——"

"That he must marry in order to obtain his own inheritance back again?" suggested an elderly, grey-haired man, gravely.

"I will not have Miss Ferrers subjected to this cross-examination," cried Rufus, angrily. "I am perfectly satisfied with the will; I am only sorry—more than sorry, I am deeply grieved—that my mother did not have the pleasure of knowing how matters stand now. I say

so, not because I believe she would have made a different will, but because I believe it would have been the greatest possible pleasure to her to know that Miss Ferrers has promised to become my wife; and I must remind you that the promise was given in utter ignorance even of the existence of a will."

"The knowledge of the will might have made a difference," said Mr. Fairfax, coldly.

"What do you say to that, Nell?" asked Rufus, while Lord Maurice watched me with eager eyes.

"It would have made no difference," I answered, steadfastly. "I think, gentlemen," I added, turning from him to them, "that you are inclined to believe the worst of me. Perhaps that is natural in the circumstances, but it is a little hard upon me. I regret the will as I regret the mistake which caused it to be made, but I am sure that Mrs. Sandys discovered her mistake at the last, when it was too late to make any alterations."

"How? What do you mean?" cried my champions, eagerly.

"Did she not tell you, just at the end, that she 'did it for the best'?" I asked of Rufus. "You know we thought she must have been wandering, but that was what she meant. Happily, there is no harm done—to you." And then I turned, without a bow, without even a glance at the others, and walked out of the room.

I changed my dignified walk for a run as soon as the door was closed behind me, and made a rush for the boudoir, where, after a few minutes, Lord Maurice and Rufus followed me.

"You brave, plucky little woman," cried Lord Maurice; "I knew I could trust her honour in your hands."

"I am glad you were so cool and composed, dear," said Rufus, putting his arm round me in utter disregard of Lord Maurice. "You looked like an insulted queen when you walked out and left us all standing gaping at one another."

"I think you did not gape very long," I remarked.

"Oh, I did not press them to stay; so they betook themselves off in the 'bus, the whole clan together."

"I am glad of it," I said. "Rufus, shall we all have to turn out?"

"You won't. It is your house now, you know; so you can turn us out as soon as you please," he answered. "However, I suppose you'll let us stay a few days."

"Don't be so silly," I said, half crying. "Mrs. Doyle says she will stay as long as she possibly can. Isn't it kind of her?"

"Very kind. And Ferrari will be here on Saturday, you know."

"Prince Ferrari?" I repeated, blankly.

"Yes, dear. Oh, I forgot. You did not know. I have just had a telegram from him." Rufus produced a crumpled yellow paper from his pocket, which, being smoothed out, proved to be from Luigi.

"Shocked beyond words," it said. "Start for Hutton Royal in an hour."

"How did he know, I wonder?" I said, dreamily.

"I wired him," answered Rufus.

"Oh!" I said, stupidly.

Then Lord Maurice, rising, said he too must be thinking of going.

"Where?" I asked.

"Home, I suppose," he answered.

I looked at Rufus, and he spoke for both of us,

"Don't do anything of the kind, Maurice," he said, kindly; "stay here with us yet awhile. Don't desert us just now."

That was so like Rufus, to put his invitation in such a light that Lord Maurice seemed to be doing us a favour in staying. I think I never knew any one with so delicate a mind. I wondered impatiently how it was I could not care for him more than I did. Lord Maurice's pale face flushed with pleasure, and he said that he should like to stay.

"You are very much like her," he ended. "It is a wonder, even to me, how she could make that will."

"Maurice, my dear fellow," replied Rufus, "the very best of us are apt to make mistakes. I made one in not telling my mother whilst I had a good opportunity that I cared for Nell. We made mistakes, both of us, and you know there is no harm done at all. The will does not trouble me in the least; it does trouble me, not a little, that she died without seeing her great wish realised.

Oh, how mean, how very mean I felt! I wondered if I should ever be able to hear that regret of Rufus's without wincing. Perhaps, when I learned to love him better than Prince Ferrari. Only I wondered when that would be? When we were married, perhaps. In all the novels I had ever read, love seemed to come after marriage, as naturally as fish after soup, and I trusted it would so come to me; but I was very doubtful about it. I loved Rufus as I had always loved him; but, unfortunately, it was only as I had always loved him; that was the worst of it. What I did not find so easy was loving him best—was the putting of the other one quite out of my heart and life.

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Well, Prince Ferrari was coming—was actually on his way. Surely, his altered manner,—for now he must treat me only as a friend and nothing more,—surely, that would help me to realise that I must lead an entirely new life.

Surely, the congratulations which we should all have to give him would help me to realise that he was nothing to me any more.

Should I have to give him a wedding-present, I wondered. Yes, and to Winifred also. I would not let her think I grudged him to her. What should it be? I might give her a bracelet—one of those golden snakes with a jewelled head; it would be most applicable to my feelings, at all events, and very appropriate to her character. But for him? Ah, that did puzzle me.

I wondered how he would meet me, what he would say, how he would address me. I wondered, I went over and over the scene in twenty different ways. I fretted and fumed during the two days following the funeral, wishing the meeting were over, and then I wished it were far away in the future. More than once I thought of running away and hiding myself, and then I would end in passionate weeping. Poor Nell! Poor Nell!

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## CHAPTER XXXIII

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### EXPLANATIONS

"I SHALL be obliged to go up to town to-day, Nell," said Rufus while we were at breakfast on the Saturday morning.

"Oh, will you?" I returned, blankly, for I did not at all like to be left without the protection of his presence at the interview which would come about at some period of the day.

"I must, dear. Scott, my great friend, you know, has got himself arrested, and, as he is on duty to-morrow, there'll be a pretty row if he is not forthcoming."

"Why, what can you do?" I asked.

"Pay the money for him, of course."

"Oh, it is debt, is it?" I remarked, with careless relief. "I thought perhaps he had murdered somebody. You'll be back to-night, will you not?"

"Yes; most likely in time for dinner; certainly by the last train."

And so, by the first train, he departed for town. I went with him to the station, and should really have enjoyed the ride were it not for the suspense which hung over me, the suspense and the dread with which I looked forward to Prince Ferrari's coming. I felt very strongly tempted, when I reached the house again, to go straight to bed, under the plea of a bad headache. The excuse

would have been real enough. Unfortunately, Mrs. Doyle had promised to drive over with Lord Maurice to the castle directly after luncheon to see his father's pictures, and, as Prince Ferrari would probably arrive during the afternoon, I felt bound by courtesy to receive him; I would not leave him to be received by the servants so long as I was not too ill to sit up.

So after luncheon Mrs. Doyle and Lord Maurice departed, and not ten minutes after they had gone a telegram arrived from Prince Ferrari to say that he would be at Hutton at three o'clock. I wished fervently that I had asked them to give up their expedition and stay with me, but, alas, it was too late. Even Cigarette herself could not have overtaken them then, and so I was compelled to put the best face upon the matter that I could, and, having ordered a carriage to be sent to meet him, I sat down to await his coming.

I did not quite do that, though. No, I went upstairs and dressed myself carefully, and I spun out the process of dressing to the very farthest extent; and so successful was I that I was still in my room when a maid came to tell me that Prince Ferrari had arrived.

"Where is his highness?" I asked, quietly, though my heart had begun to beat passionately at her words.

"In the boudoir, ma'am," she answered. "Charles asked his highness if he would take refreshment, but he said he had lunched in town."

"Very well; I will be down in a moment."

As soon as the door was closed I flew back to the glass and scanned myself narrowly. I was rosy enough then, but, even as I watched, the transient flush faded away, leaving me paler than before. He could not help seeing the alteration in my looks: I was a mere wreck.

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I went downstairs very slowly indeed. Once or twice I turned dizzy and clung to the handrail for support; then I summoned up all my courage, crossed the hall quickly ere I had time to repent, and opened the boudoir door. Prince Ferrari was standing on the hearth-rug, one elbow on the chimney-piece and with his face turned away from the door. As he heard the sound of my entrance, however, he turned quickly round and came to meet me, stopping short as he looked at me.

"Good Heaven, Nell!" he exclaimed, in shocked tones. "What have you been doing with yourself?"

Not a vestige of change, not the slightest embarrassment, not a touch of shame, not the very smallest compunction for my altered looks.

"How do you do, Prince Ferrari?" I said, stiffly, taking no notice of his question.

"Nell!" he cried, reproachfully, "Nell!"

"Prince?" I answered, interrogatively.

"My darling, what is the meaning of this?" he asked, holding out both his hands to me. Oh, how they were trembling.

"Will you not sit down?" I said slowly and with exasperating civility. "I understand you have already lunched."

"Have you taken leave of your senses?" he demanded, looking hard at me.

I replied coldly and quietly, "No, I hope not. Why? Do I look as if I had?"

"You look *very* ill indeed," he said, gravely; "very ill; but it is your manner that I do not understand."

"It is not difficult to understand," I answered; "you could hardly expect to return and find me quite unchanged—you who have changed so entirely."

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"What do you mean?" he cried, impatiently.

"Why do you still try to deceive me?" I asked, reproachfully.

"I!" with a frown, "*I* deceive you!"

"Oh, I have heard all about it," I said, wearily, "the whole story. Don't pretend any more."

"I don't know what you mean," he answered.

I rose and gave him a number of the *Queen*, the one in which I had seen the announcement of his forthcoming marriage.

"There," I said, quietly; "you understand that, I suppose. You know what that means."

He read the short notice with a frowning face, then tossed the journal contemptuously from him.

"*Sacramento*," he muttered under his breath.

I watched him curiously, and wondered what he would find to say. For a moment he was silent, and I began to think he was ashamed; but when he did speak, he uttered four words, such as took my breath away and changed my curiosity into despair.

"That is a falsehood," he said, slowly.

I did not say a word. I sat and stared at him in silence. I heard him repeat the words, as if I were in a dream.

"Just a falsehood," he said, savagely; "and it has vexed you for a week or more."

I only heard the last words, and then a great darkness came over me, blotting it all out: Luigi's angry fair face, his sparkling blue eyes, the furniture of the pretty room, and the glowing fire; it all faded away into a heavy grey mist, and I knew nothing more; nothing more, that is, until I woke up to find myself in Luigi's arms again and with his kisses upon my lips.

"Let me go; you mustn't touch me," I said, in a strangely quiet voice.

"Let you go," he echoed; "that indeed I will not."

"You must," I said, wearily. "You must let me go; only don't marry her."

"And why must I let you go?" he demanded.

"Because," I answered, "I have promised to marry Rufus Sandys."

Oh, he let me go then, quickly enough. He did not speak; he only stood there staring at me, such frozen horror in his blue eyes that my very heart seemed to melt within me. I leant there against the chimney-shelf, a shivering figure, my dress crushed and trampled on, and presently some fiend within me began to laugh. I have heard of men who laughed when they received the first news of their utter ruin. I understood it then. So I in my great misery laughed over this, the utter ruin of my fair hopes and wishes—over the open grave of my poor little love-story, and Luigi stood looking at me, but never speaking.

"Can't you say something?" I cried at last. "Oh, you asked me just now if I had taken leave of my senses. I believe I have; I wish I had. I wonder if mad people remember?"

"Hush, child!" he said, gently, then took my hand in his. "Is this you tell me true, or are you only teasing me?"

"Teasing you!" I echoed. "That would indeed be a ghastly joke."

"Forgive me," he said, simply; "I am so loth to believe it, that is all. What made you do it, Nell? Doubt of me?"

"Don't you know," I answered, putting my hand up

to my head that I might try to collect my thoughts and tell him how it all happened, "that in case of Mrs. Sandys's death, father has left you my guardian?"

"Well?"

"Well, then, Mrs. Sandys is dead," I said, impatiently; "you know that, don't you?"

"Certainly; but I do not see why that should make you engage yourself to Rufus."

"Oh, how stupid you are!" I cried, with a fretful sigh. "It was only the other day that I saw that," pointing to the paper lying still on the floor where he had flung it in his rage, "and of course I thought it was true."

"You foolish child," he said, sadly.

"Not so foolish as you think, Luigi," I answered. "For two months past there have come letters every week—very often twice a week—from Mrs. and Miss De la Motte, and in all it was Prince Ferrari who was the burden of their song. 'We are going to such a place with Prince Ferrari.' 'Dear Winifred is having her portrait painted to please Prince Ferrari,' and all the rest of it. And so, you see, I was expecting it every day, and when it came, I believed that it was true. Now, don't you understand?"

"I understand her," he said, savagely. "I see through her game clearly. But still I don't see why you need have promised Rufus."

"Do you think, if it had been true, that I would have come to live with you and that woman—that wicked woman?" I cried, indignantly. "I accepted Rufus—nay, I believe I almost asked him to marry me—solely to escape the pain which I could not have borne."

The light had broken in upon him then with a ven-

geance, and he ground out one or two Italian maledictions from between his teeth.

"Curse her!" he muttered; and though I did not utter the words with my lips, I must own they found their echo in my weary heart.

"But it was not quite all her fault," I said presently, "for I should have been obliged to marry him all the same, you know."

"Why?" he demanded, fiercely.

"Have you not heard of the will?" I cried. "Mrs. Sandys has left everything to me."

"To you?"

"Everything, except a few legacies; but if I marry Rufus it will all become his, except a thousand a year to me for life; and so I am bound in common honesty to marry him to give him back his own."

"She must have been mad!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, no; only mistaken, like the rest of us. You should have done as I told you, Luigi, and all this would have been avoided. I knew no good would come of it."

I disregarded the blank horror in his face, and continued:

"Mrs. Sandys wished me to marry Rufus, as you know, for she had some idea that I was very much in love with him, I—I——" I repeated, bitterly.

"Well?" he said, hoarsely.

"Well, she also imagined that Rufus had some objection to marrying me, instead of the poor boy caring for me beyond every one else; and, in order to almost compel him to marry me, she left this miserable will. If only you had not had such absurdly quixotic ideas about my not knowing my own mind, all this would never have

come about; but you would do it, you would not listen to me," I ended, fretfully.

I knew it was not very generous to reproach him, but I was too miserable to take heed of his pained face until his next words reminded me of my unkindness.

"I have ruined my whole life by my own folly," he said, blankly; "and so I may go and shoot myself as soon as I like."

"Shoot yourself!" I cried. "Oh, don't say that! Just think what that would mean to me."

"I can think of nothing but that I have lost you," he answered; "lost you by my own folly,—by my own shortsightedness. How was it I never foresaw all this? I thought only of your good and your happiness, my precious love. I did it for the best."

"So did she," I said, softly. Wretched as I was, I could not think or speak of her with blame; with him it was different.

"It is unjust," he cried, fiercely; "cruelly, wickedly unjust. Her own son—her only child ought to have been more to her than you."

"My father was the only man she ever loved," I replied, and she promised him that she would sacrifice her whole life for my happiness. She tried her best to secure happiness for me, and we must not blame her because she has failed."

"But I do blame her," he interrupted, fiercely.

"You forget that she is dead," I said, softly.

"I do remember it," he cried, in loud anger; "but I cannot forget that she has ruined both our lives."

"It might have been averted," I reminded him; at which the anger faded out of his eyes and gave place to blank misery. "As you said just now, we all did it for

the best; and, oh, we have all made terrible mistakes. We are all the same. Poor Rufus is blaming himself now that he did not tell his mother the true state of his feelings for me, when she taxed him with caring for Miss De la Motte; he, like all the rest of us, did what he thought was for the best. Mrs. Sandys herself, poor darling, said,—indeed, they were the very last words she ever spoke,—‘I did it for the best;’ and you, Luigi, you too kept our love a secret, all for the best. We cannot blame each other so much as ourselves; I most of all,” I ended, passionately.

“I don’t see what you have to blame yourself for,” he said, quickly.

“Perhaps not; but I do. I was so perfectly certain that good never came of evil yet. I ought not to have given way to your wishes. I shouldn’t have done so, only I fancied, how and why I cannot say, that you were reluctant to speak to Mrs. Sandys because you did not care to bind yourself. I thought—Heaven forgive me for it—that you had found me lonely and in trouble, and that you had made love to me as the easiest way of consoling me. I thought you were quite ready to pour balm into my bleeding heart, but I thought you did not wish the balm to cost you your freedom; and so I did not *insist* upon the truth being proclaimed, because I did not want to force you into marrying me against your will. There, that is the truth. I, too, acted, as I thought, for the best; but I think I am the most to blame of all.”

“Yes, I think you are,” he said, slowly, “because while we were planning our future, while my kisses were on your lips, my whole soul was open to your sight, you were thinking unjustly of me, you were suffering the caresses of a man whom all the time you

believed to be dishonourable. I thought better of you, Nell."

I bore his reproaches in silence; partly because I knew they were true, partly because I was too faint and weak to argue against them or attempt to defend myself. I remained leaning against the tall oaken chimney-shelf, and Luigi, with his hands in his pockets, stood staring moodily into the fire; but presently I broke the silence.

"I wish I were dead," I said, passionately; "I wish I had died when father did, for I have never known a moment's happiness since. No, not one," I repeated, as he raised his eyes in mute reproach to mine, "not one. From the very day you first told me you loved me I doubted you, I distrusted you; I was wretched lest that woman should come between us and carry you away from me; and so you see she has done."

"Nay, child," he said, gently, "or I should not be here now."

"Yes, you are in the same room, so that you can lift your hand and touch me, if you like," I cried, bitterly; "but how far off are we in reality? How long can you stay here? Is there not a gulf between us which neither of us can step across, except it be spanned by a grave?"

"Hush, child!" he said. "I am trying to think what can be done."

"Nothing," I returned, "nothing."

"I don't know. Could we not give this property back to Rufus?"

"And at what a cost!" I answered. "At the price of my honour, by the breaking of my word. I cannot do that."

"Not even for me?" he asked, coming close to me and

looking straight into my eyes. "Could you not do even that for me?"

"Break my word?" I cried, in great amazement. "Do you, a Ferrari, ask me to do this?"

"I ask you to do anything—everything," he answered, passionately, "which will give you back to me. Why, you are bound to me; why should you break your promise to me? It was given the first."

"Nay," I told him sadly, "you must not forget that you left me perfectly free; *you would have it so.*"

"There is no loophole for escape," he said, desperately.

"Nell, when is it to be?"

"What?"

"Your wedding?"

"Oh, I don't know," I answered, with an impatient shiver. "Nor for a year at least. We have never mentioned it."

"Then who knows what may not happen before a year has passed?" he said, with a great effort at cheerfulness.

"Judging by the year which has gone," I returned, with satirical calmness, "somebody may die."

"Oh, I didn't quite mean that, of course," he replied, carelessly. "Still, a dozen things might take place. At all events, we will have a year together, though we spend the remainder of our lives apart."

"Together?" I repeated, blankly. "How?"

"Am I not your guardian?" he asked, triumphantly.

"Yes."

"Very well; then you will have to do what I tell you until you are married; and what I tell you to do is to go back to Italy with me."

"I won't!" I said.

"You must and you shall!" he said, imperiously.

"I shall appeal to Rufus!" I cried, desperately.

"Please yourself about that," he said, quietly; "but if you do, I, too, shall appeal to Rufus. I shall have a pretty little story to tell him; and, indeed, I don't know but that it would be the best course; certainly, it would be the most honourable course, looking at it from any standpoint."

"What will people say?" I asked, falling weakly back upon the only support that occurred to my mind.

"You forget my mother," he said, smiling.

Yes, I had forgotten. But I did not give in without one more struggle.

"I think it is very unkind," I said, miserably. "It is only making it harder in the end."

"I wish, my little Nell," he answered, "that I could make life too hard for you to live, except as my wife. I wish that I could teach you to love me better than life and honour itself; to love me as I love you."

"If it had not been for your absurdly honourable scruples," I returned, disdainfully, "all this would never have happened."

"Ah, no! But I did not love you then as I do now. I would cheerfully throw over honour and everything for your sake now. But I am not going to give in; we have a whole year of freedom before us, and we don't know what may turn up. I won't think about it. I won't acknowledge to myself that you are anything but my little ward, my old friend's daughter."

"Yes, you will," I replied, "when you hear Rufus call me 'darling.'"

"Does he do that?" with a frown. "Does he presume to do that?"

"You forget I am his promised wife," I said, quietly.

If Luigi wished to forget the fact, I was determined that I would not let him do so while I had a tongue with which to remind him of it.

"I forget everything except that you are the woman I love best upon earth," he answered, defiantly. "I'll tell you what, Nell, I'll fight young Rufus for you."

He tried hard to speak gaily, but his haggard face told me too plainly of the awful struggle going on in his heart. Hitherto, by a great effort, I had kept my tears back; but then they came forth with a rush, and I flung myself down upon the nearest seat, sobbing passionately.

"My love, my love!" he cried, soothingly. "We won't talk any more about it, darling. You shall tell me all about Mrs. Sandys."

And then, leaning against him still, I told him the sad history of the past fortnight, and presently the others came in from the Castle, and I had to force myself to introduce Mrs. Doyle to the new arrival.

"You will find us all very sad, Prince," said Mrs. Doyle, in her sweet voice. "It was so sudden, so utterly unexpected. Oh, it has been a terrible shock to all of us!"

"It must have been," he answered. "I was never so horrified in my life as when the telegram from Sandys reached me."

It was wonderful to me that he could keep his voice so calm, his manner so perfectly composed. As for me, my whole frame was trembling, so that I was compelled to fold my arms that I might hide my shaking hands.

"And Nell looks very ill, don't you think?" continued Mrs. Doyle. "I know Mrs. Sandys was very uneasy about her some weeks ago."

"She looks very ill," he answered, gravely.

"I am sure she ought to have a change, but, unfortu-

nately, my husband cannot get more leave at present; and really Aldershot is not a very lively sort of place."

"I have been telling her that she must go back to Italy with me," he returned, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"But, pardon me, how can that be? You are not——"

"My mother is at the Villa Ferrari," he said, quietly; "so I think it will be best in every way for Nell to go there. I am sure this climate does not suit her. I never saw any one so terribly altered in my life."

"She certainly looks ill," Mrs. Doyle admitted. "Only this morning Rufus was saying he wished she could go to a warmer climate for the winter, or even a sea-voyage; but there was no one to take her. Of course, if her life were in any danger, my husband would have consented to my going, but we have not been married very long," with a little apologetic laugh, "and he would not like me to go away for several months."

"Of course not; I can quite understand that," he said, with a courteous bow. "Then I may look upon it as a settled thing, more particularly since Sandys wishes it also. By the bye, where is Sandys? I've not seen him yet."

"He is in town," I answered. "He will be back this evening."

But Rufus came back in time for dinner, and when he came in Luigi greeted him cordially,—as cordially as if there was nothing between them.

"And I must congratulate you, my dear Prince," said Rufus presently, when Prince Ferrari's expressions of condolence were all exhausted.

"Thanks, very many. May I ask why?"

"On your marriage, of course," said Rufus.

"I am not thinking of marrying," said Luigi.

"We heard—indeed, Nell saw the announcement in the *Queen*—that you were going to marry Winifred De la Motte. Then it was premature?"

"I don't know anything about its being premature," answered Luigi, brusquely. "It's not true, that's all?"

"I'm not at all surprised," remarked Rufus, in a tone of such satisfaction that I smiled, wondering what he would say did he know the whole truth.

"Nell is looking dreadfully ill, is she not?" asked Rufus presently.

"Very. Mrs. Doyle tells me you think she ought to be in a warmer climate."

"I do; but where is she to go, and with whom?"

"I think she had better go back at once to Italy with me. My mother will, I am sure, take all care of her; and, to be plain with you, Sandys, I do not think this climate agrees with her."

"What do you say, Nell?" asked Rufus, doubtfully.

I could see that he remembered my prayer to be saved from this very plan.

"Would you like that?" he questioned further.

"I do not mind," I answered. If I had had moral courage enough I should have said that I preferred to remain in England; but Luigi's eyes were fixed upon us, and I dared not say what was in my mind.

"Then, of course, that settles it," said Rufus, in a greatly relieved tone; "perhaps I might get foreign leave, and go with you for a short time; if you will have me, that is."

"We shall be charmed," returned Luigi, "now or any other time."

"Thanks. I'm sure you're very kind," answered my

fiancé, cordially. "And if you can only bring the roses back to these pale cheeks"—touching my face as he spoke—"I shall be grateful to you forever."

And so it was settled. I, who a year ago was contentedly wandering about with my father, was going back to Italy as Prince Ferrari's ward.

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## CHAPTER XXXIV

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### LETTER AND SPIRIT

WHEN I went down to breakfast the following morning, I found Rufus alone.

"I must be awfully early" I remarked.

"It is just nine o'clock," he answered.

It was not the custom at Hutton Royal to wait for any one at any meal whatever, and I sat down to pour out Rufus's coffee quite as a matter of course; equally as a matter of course did he kiss me when he fetched the cup.

"Nell," he said, when he had returned to his seat, "you know, dear, if you don't like this Florentine business, you are not obliged to do it."

"What Florentine business?" I asked.

"Going to live with Ferrari and his mother."

"Oh, I don't mind," I said, as carelessly as I could.

"But, Nell, you seemed in such a fright when I first told you he had been appointed your guardian."

"That was because I thought he was going to marry Galatea," I cried. "You have no conception, Rufus, how I detest that woman."

"Oh, then it's all right," he said, in a relieved tone. "Don't you see, I was afraid that perhaps you might be doing what you disliked. Of course, if you had any ob-

jection to the plan, we must have made different arrangements."

"I shall have to do just what Prince Ferrari tells me," I said; "he is my guardian, you know."

"Ah, yes; a regular Bluebeard."

"Who is that?" said a voice at the door. "Not that pretty little woman's husband, surely. Oh, what a shame!"

"If you mean Major Doyle," I answered, "you never made a greater mistake in your life. No, we were speaking of yourself."

"Of me! I trust you don't look upon me as being at all like that exceptionally objectionable gentleman."

"I was telling Rufus that I should have to do as you tell me, now that you are my guardian."

"And has he any objection?"

"No, I don't think so. Have you, Rufus?"

"So long as you have not, dear," he answered, cheerfully; whereat I saw that Prince Ferrari winced, and an angry little flash came into his blue eyes.

I could not help feeling happier since he had come; and, what was more, I could not help showing it. My marriage seemed such a long, long way off, and, like Luigi, I was determined to think only of the present, and not to look into the future at all. Perhaps it was not very honest; in fact, I had a sort of feeling in my heart that it was the very reverse. But, then, I had been so cruelly robbed of my love, so cheated out of life's happiness, that I could not find it in my heart to resist the cup of pleasure—all transient though it was—which had been thus unexpectedly held to my lips.

"I wish it were over," says Rufus, a little later, as we passed down the village street on our way to church.

"Over! what?" I asked. I was terribly afraid that he had suddenly turned rebellious against my year of probation.

"The service, of course," he answered.

I was greatly relieved, but still puzzled, and, unfortunately, we reached the porch before I could ask any more questions or he give any explanations. I understood it all well enough when the sermon began—the very text startled me, coming upon me like a thunder-clap:

"She hath done what she could."

The words came home to the hearts of three of the rector's hearers that morning. It would be hard to say which of the three sitting together, Luigi, Rufus, or I, started the most visibly. As for Lord Maurice, he rested his elbow on the table and covered his face with his hand. I think if I had known what to expect I should have stayed away from church. Rufus told me afterwards that it was a "funeral sermon;" I wished I had not heard it. In the kindness of his heart, Rufus slipped his arm within Lord Maurice's when we came out of church, leaving me to walk home with Prince Ferrari. Mrs. Doyle and her husband were driving.

"Maurice seems to feel it dreadfully," remarked Luigi, when we were clear of the churchyard.

"He was awfully fond of her," I replied. "He must be a good deal younger."

"Maurice is thirty-two. How old was Mrs. Sandys?"

"Thirty-nine," I answered.

There was a moment's silence, then Luigi spoke.

"I say, little one, how dreadful these English Decembers are!"

"Very bad," I answered; "not so cold, though, as I expected."

"It has been an unusually mild winter, they tell me. All the same, it will be as well that you should miss the east winds, which will be sure to come with the spring. Ah, how glad I shall be to get back to Florence!"

"For awhile," I said, gloomily; "I might as well remain here, for I shall have to accustom myself to the springs, and the winters, too; so the sooner the better. What good is there in putting off the evil day? It must come eventually."

"My dearest child, we must all die," he replied. "We all know that there is no chance of escape for any of us; but we contrive to make ourselves remarkably comfortable for a time, despite that unpleasant knowledge."

"Oh, but that is a different matter," I maintained; "that is altogether another matter."

"I wonder where Rufus is?" I remarked, when we reached the house. I asked the question more as a means of diverting our conversation than from any real feeling of curiosity as to my fiancé's whereabouts or occupation.

"Do you want him?" demanded Luigi, rather fiercely. "Can you not exist without him for ten minutes? Do I weary you?"

I laughed, but it was a dreary laugh, and before I could make any reply Rufus appeared, bringing in his hand a letter.

"There, that is done," he remarked, cheerfully, laying it on the table.

"What is it?" I asked, disregarding Luigi's dark look at my interest in Rufus.

"Application for foreign leave, dear," he answered. "What a sell it will be if I don't get it!"

"Is there any chance of that?"

"Oh, no, I don't think so," he answered, easily.

It was late in the afternoon ere I saw Luigi alone. I found him in the great hall standing with his back to the fire.

"I want to ask you one question, Nell," he said; "do you like Sandys or me best?"

His tone was so unkind, it reminded me so unexpectedly of the straits I was in, that I did not reply in words, but stood looking at the fire with eyes which threatened every moment to overflow.

"Because," he continued, brusquely, "if it is Sandys who holds the first place, it is of no use my remaining here. Just tell me, and I'll go back to Florence to-morrow."

"And Winifred De la Motte," I suggested. "I wish you would," I added, impetuously.

"You wish I would go back to Winifred De la Motte!" he repeated. "Do you mean that, Nell?"

"Yes—no—oh, I wish you would do anything!" I cried, passionately; "anything which would make me feel less hateful and despicable than I do now. I know what you are thinking,—that I shall grow to love you more and more, until I am willing to give up even my honour and my word for you."

"Perhaps—if Fate wills it," he answered.

"And you would be the first to despise me," I exclaimed, hotly. "What would you think and say? 'I cannot trust you—you deceived and cheated Rufus Sandys, and you broke your word to him.' And I should deserve it."

"Do you think me capable of doing that, Nell?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't want to say anything disagreeable," I

answered. "But, after all, you know, Luigi you are only human."

The others came in then, and he had no chance of speaking to me again. I thought it all over during the rest of the day, and although I was glad that I had kept my word, I was not at all satisfied with the manner of keeping it; there had been too much of the letter and not enough of the spirit.

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## CHAPTER XXXV

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### BACK TO THE LAND OF SUNSHINE

"LEAVE or no leave?" said Rufus when he came into the breakfast-room last of all to find an official-looking letter among those beside his plate.

"How provoking!" he exclaimed, flinging it down again.

"Won't they let you have it?" I asked, trying to make my tone sound dreadfully disappointed, and, I fear, succeeding but very badly.

Rufus, however, was too much disgusted and annoyed to notice me or my manner, and answered, vexedly:

"Regiment to hold itself in readiness for foreign service. So they'll send us out to be shot in South Africa, I suppose. Well, never mind, darling, it can't be helped; and if this business comes to nothing, I'll try for leave again in the spring," he said. "I shall scarcely know what to do with myself when you are away. Wednesday week do you go?"

"That was how we settled it," I answered.

"I am afraid I cannot spare any longer time in England," put in Prince Ferrari; "and, indeed, I think Nell ought to be out of these fogs and damp. Of a certainty, it is a terrible climate."

Both Rufus and Major Doyle laughed, and I glanced out at the drizzling rain and the yellow-white mist hanging over the park and the woods.

"I shall scarcely know the sun again when I see him, and he must altogether have forgotten me by this time," I remarked.

Luigi shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"It is not surprising," he said, carelessly, "that the English are so sad a race; your climate is assuredly most trying."

"I wish you'd come back to the Castle with me, Sandys," said Lord Maurice presently. "My mother and Ethel will be back next week."

"Oh, yes; I will, with pleasure," he answered. "I shall feel like a regular castaway. I'm sure it's a perfect charity to take me in. I shall like to see Ethel, too. Such a time it is since we met; never since we were very small and spoony."

"Yes, you were a great flame of Ethel's in your juvenile days," remarked Lord Maurice. "I remember Mrs. Sandys giving an immense party for the children hereabout. She wore that evening a pale blue dress trimmed with silver."

Poor Lord Maurice! That pale blue and silver-trimmed dress had stayed in his memory better than the party, and he must have been only a boy then. I was glad for both their sakes that Rufus had promised to stay with him.

The ten days were soon over, and at last that of our departure arrived. I woke up rather early with a feeling that something was about to happen, and then I remembered what. I was going to leave all these fogs and damps behind me; I was going back to dear Italy and to forget the past dreary months. Ah, but even as the thought crossed my mind, my eye caught the glitter of the diamonds in the ring upon my finger, and they reminded me that there was one thing which I must not

allow myself to forget and which I must school myself to keep in remembrance.

I had promised to ride with Rufus, so I dressed in my habit, that we might start as soon as breakfast was over.

"That looks better," he exclaimed when I made my appearance.

I sat down at the table without answering, for I remembered with a sudden rush of sadness that the last time I had worn my habit she was here; that I never saw her after; that the next time I stood near her it was beside her grave. Presently I looked up, to see his wondering eyes fixed upon me.

"Are you vexed, Nell?" he asked.

"Oh, no," I answered, forcing my tears back and choking down the lump which had risen in my throat. "But the last time I went for a ride was that morning when she began to be ill, you know, and I never saw her afterwards."

"I would not have asked you to go if I had known," he said, kindly. "Only, we don't know when we may have a ride again—in England, at least."

"Oh, I don't mind going," I said, hastily. "And one must grow accustomed to things some time."

I did not enjoy our ride at all. I felt very weak, and, moreover, Madam Cigarette took it for granted—being very fresh herself—that I was ready for any mad pranks she might choose to go in for, with the result that she nearly had me off several times.

"Oh, I am tired to death!" I cried when we reached home once more. Luigi was in the quadrangle and caught me as I slid off Cigarette's back.

"I am utterly worn out," I said, wearily. "I do not

think I was ever so tired in my life; and, oh, there is so much to do this afternoon!"

"Don't do it," he suggested.

"I must. But now I think I will rest until luncheon. I shall be better then."

I changed my habit for a gown and came down into the hall where the three men were. The Doyles were out, they told me. So there I stayed, in the depths of a huge chair, until the bell rang for lunch.

We were to leave Hutton Station at six o'clock and dine at Harwich; but between luncheon and that time there was much to be done. I had to go down to the rectory to say good-bye to the girls there, to look in upon old Meggs, the sexton, and to visit Mrs. Sandys's grave.

Rufus went with me round the gardens and the stables immediately after lunch, and then we went down to the rectory, not only to say farewell, but to take Elinor Marchmont a present for her wedding, which was to take place before Christmas.

"How good of you!" she cried, delightedly. "I'm sure I never thought of such a thing."

Laura, having less to occupy her than her sister, promised to write to me now and then; and, after staying half an hour or so, I rose to leave.

"Poor Rufus!" said Elinor, in pitying tones. "It does seem hard for him to lose you."

"Oh, Rufus is not going to lose me," I answered; "only for a time, at least. Indeed, I think he is more likely to lose me altogether if I remain in England any longer."

"Too bad they wouldn't give me leave, though," said Rufus. "I suppose they think I shall be going abroad soon enough; eh, Nell?"

"Where?" asked Laura, innocently.

"Where the war-cloud is," he answered.

"Be quiet, Rufus," I said, hastily, for Elinor's eyes had filled with tears of sympathy. "It will be quite time enough to talk like that when you have received your orders."

"That is how she always snubs me," he laughed to the two girls. "Pray, do you treat Adderley in that manner?"

Of course Elinor declared that she did not, and then I said farewell in real earnest.

When we reached the house, I found the carriage which was to take the Doyles to the station was at the door. My parting with them was necessarily cut very short, and I was glad of it. Mrs. Doyle kissed me a dozen times and murmured blessings over me; and her husband, after telling me to take care of myself, took me by both hands and kissed me too. And then they were gone.

It was not so long before we had to follow them, and in the meantime I had as much as I could manage to get through, for I had to go the round of the house, bidding adieu to every one.

How kind and good Rufus was during the short journey to Harwich and the dinner at the hotel. He made such an effort to be brave and bright, for fear, I suppose, that I should break down at leaving him. Poor boy! More than once I felt tempted to cry out that I would not go away at all, but there was an insurmountable obstacle in the shape of Prince Ferrari and his consent; that kept me silent.

By and by, when Luigi and Lord Maurice, who had come down to see the last of me, strolled off to look after Cigarette, who was going with us, Rufus came close to me.

I did not hesitate for a moment, but put my arms round his neck and kissed him; then, before either of us could speak, Luigi came back and said that time was up.

We found when we reached the boat that the time was so nearly up that they might not go on board with us, and so we must say farewell on the pier.

"God bless you, my treasure," said Rufus.

I did not speak to either of them; I could not. I followed Luigi blindly, and then the gangway was lifted.

Soon the big ungainly boat moved slowly away from the pier, and the lights and the voices from the shore seemed to be gliding away from us. I could no longer distinguish Rufus and Lord Maurice from the others; the noises on board, too, were subsiding; there were not so many trampling feet, so many hoarse orders from the bridge.

"Does it not seem," said Luigi, with a laugh and putting his arm round me, "as if we were just setting off on our wedding-tour?"

I uttered a sharp cry, "Oh, Rufus, Rufus, Rufus!" But out of the darkness and the gloom there came no voice to answer me.

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## CHAPTER XXXVI

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### AT THE VILLA FERRARI

I NEED not go into the details of our journey. It was late in the afternoon when we reached our destination, the Villa Ferrari, and the Princess came out to receive me.

"Dearest child," she cried, as I reached the ground, "you must be tired to death—utterly fatigued."

"Yes, I am tired," I admitted.

"There is nothing of the child left, Luigi," she exclaimed. "Ah, but it is just in time that you have brought her."

"So I thought," he answered, kissing his mother on either cheek. "How very gay you look, mother."

"I have visitors," she replied. "Now come in, Nell."

She did not tell us who her visitors were, but a moment later a white-robed figure came forward.

"How are you, Miss Ferrars?" said a familiar voice.

My heart gave a great bound and my whole frame a violent shiver, for it was Galatea,—Galatea, with her cold, statuesque beauty, her steel-grey eyes, and her hand-touch.

"Oh!" I ejaculated. "Are you staying here?"

"Yes," she returned, sweetly; "we have been here some days. What a terrible time you have had at Hutton Royal."

It made me hot and indignant to hear her speak of our trouble in that indifferent way—just as if we might have had a shower of soot down one of the chimneys or a few chimney-pots off the roof.

"Very sad," I answered, curtly. "Which room am I to have, Princess?"

"Let me show Nell, dear Princess," she interrupted. "Pray, do not you trouble."

"Thank you, I know the house inside and out," I answered. "Which room is it, Princess?"

"The Venetian room, dear child," she answered. "But I will ring for Giovanni. You will come down into the *salon* when you are ready."

"Yes, thanks," I replied. And so I went to my room, absolutely trembling with indignation. To think of that woman's insufferable impertinence playing at being the daughter of the house to me who had known it since my babyhood,—she, who was never in it until a few weeks before! I was glad to think that I had put that number of the *Queen* into one of my boxes. She would hardly like me to bring it out; but if she did not take care what she was about, I might do so with great effect.

There was no further passage of arms between us that day. The following morning I happened to be sitting alone in the little *salon* when Galatea came in, settling herself in an easy-chair, apparently with every intention of remaining there. Luigi had gone out, and the Princess and Mrs. De la Motte were driving together. I had been writing to Rufus when Galatea appeared.

"So you and Rufus are engaged?" she began.

"Yes," I answered, briefly.

"Ah, I thought it not unlikely; and really, do you know, Nell, I am very glad—for Rufus's sake."

"Oh, are you? Why?" I asked.

"Well," with a little impatient sigh and a downward droop of her eyelids, "I am very glad to hear that he is going to be married."

"Yes; but why?" I repeated.

"Oh, I can hardly say why. But Rufus, poor boy, has been disappointed once, and I—I am very glad that he has been able to get over it."

She intended me to believe that Rufus had proposed to her and been refused—a very neat little sting it would have been if I had not known the righteous indignation in which he held her. But she let the shaft fly with a skill and precision which alone would have told me what an adept she was at mischief-making,—that is, which would have told me if I had not known it already.

"What a strange will that was, too," she said presently.

"Yes," I answered, simply.

"Most strange, because, you know, it in a manner forces Rufus to marry you."

"We were already engaged when it was read," I replied.

"Ah!"

I knew what that meant—that she did not believe me. Well, Galatea was welcome to believe or disbelieve, just as she chose; I was quite indifferent.

"Yes," she continued, sweetly, after a minute or two of silence, "Rufus is a very nice boy, and very handsome, too; he and I used to be great friends."

"Were you really?" I remarked.

"Oh, dear, yes," she said, with a little affected laugh. "Though, of course, he never told you anything about that?"

"Well, no, he certainly never did," I admitted.

"I thought not. Oh, my dear child, you must never inquire too closely into your husband's past. It does not do. It is far better to ignore all the bygone affairs. Yes, Rufus and I were great friends at one time; but, then, Rufus was not content to remain so—men are never satisfied. Now, I have no doubt he has said all manner of hard things about me; has he not?"

I could not help laughing outright, and she continued, "Yes, I know it; oh, you need not mind telling me, for I know all about it. I know what men are. There is but a very short step between their love and their hatred; in fact, it is all a matter of passion. They are over head and ears in love with you and have every intention of remaining your firm friend forever, and all the rest of it; but just offend their vanity, just let them see that they are not the first on your list, and—pouf! away it all goes, and for the rest of their life they hate you just as much as they loved you yesterday."

"Poor sort of love that," I remarked.

"You are skeptical," she said, smiling; "but, my dear Nell, when you have been married a year or two, you will be of my opinion. By the way, when are you to be married?"

"I'm sure I don't know," I answered. "Some time or other."

"You don't seem very eager about it," she said, suspiciously. "Now, take my advice, and don't keep Rufus waiting too long or he will slip through your fingers."

"Oh, Rufus will keep," I said, carelessly, thinking the while that Miss De la Motte might have chosen a more refined expression than "slip through your fingers."

"Oh, yes, there is that will; I forgot that," she said.

"How very odd it is that Prince Ferrari should be left your guardian."

"Oh, no, not so very," I returned.

"And how strange that, after all, you should come here, and we are all living together again—all except poor Mrs. Sandys."

"I do not think my coming here is half so strange as your doing so," I said, coldly. "You forget that I know every nook and corner in this house, and have done so from when a little child. Besides, I was in a manner obliged to come, for I could not remain alone at Hutton Royal. It did not suit my health either."

"I thought you were looking dreadfully ill, but I set that down to—a different cause, though of course,"—with a soft little laugh,—“since you are engaged to Rufus, I must have been mistaken. So Hutton Royal does not suit your health? Pray, how will you live there?”

My face had flushed indignantly, partly because she had guessed the cause of my altered looks so correctly, and partly because I really did not know how I should manage to live there. Happily, however, she saved me the trouble of replying by continuing:

"And of course the shock of poor Mrs. Sandys's death must have been very great. I think I never was so horrified in my life as when I heard it. I simply could not believe it."

"Yes, it was very sudden," I answered, "though I think she must have had a weak constitution. She seemed to have no strength to fight against the disease; from the very first her case was hopeless. There was never any rally at all, never any sign of fluctuation, only steady progress for the worse."

"Rufus said, when he wrote to my mother, that the Doyles were with you."

"Yes; Mrs. Doyle came the day she died; as soon, indeed, as she heard her illness was serious."

"Ah, yes; and you were just going to Devonshire."

"Yes; I was not very well at Hutton Royal."

"Mrs. Sandys had invited Prince Ferrari to visit her there, you know."

"Had she?" I said, in surprise.

"Of course he could not leave Florence just then; at least, he *would* not," with a conscious smile.

"Why not?" I asked. I knew all about it, but I wanted to hear what she had to say.

"Why not?" she repeated. "Oh, it is a secret. But still, as you are engaged, I may tell you."

"Why, Prince Ferrari is not engaged?" I said, bluntly.

"No, perhaps not actually engaged," she replied, in an insinuating tone, as if she might tell a great deal if she chose, "but—but—— Oh, Prince, is that you?"

"Yes," he answered. "What have you both been doing?"

"Miss De la Motte has been telling me some great news," I answered; "great news."

"What about?"

"About you." I disregarded her warning cough and declined to meet her glance, though I was perfectly aware she was looking daggers at me. "Miss De la Motte says you are engaged to be married."

"I?" he cried, in great astonishment.

"No, I never said——" she began.

"Didn't you?" I said, laughing. "I understood you to."

"Ah," said Luigi. "I wonder what they will say next?"

That I am married, I suppose. Do you know, Miss De la Motte, they have actually got the story into the English papers?"

"What story?" she asked, with apparent innocence, but with her face all aflame notwithstanding.

"The story of my engagement. Miss Ferrers saw it. Did you not, Nell?"

"Yes, I saw it," I answered. "I wonder who could have sent the announcement to the paper. It must have been from Florence."

"Merely an *on dit*," said Galatea, carelessly. "Well, I must be going upstairs. Adieu."

"She also delicately conveyed to me that I needn't be set up at having secured Rufus, seeing that he is only a cast-off of hers. Poor boy! and he does hate her so."

"I believe you have a hankering after him, even yet, Nell," he said, jealously.

"Well," I returned, perversely, "ought I not to have a hankering after my future husband?"

"Ah, but have you?"

I sighed dolefully, without speaking, and he pressed his point still further.

"Throw him over, Nell," he said, persuasively, "or, depend upon it, Galatea will trap me after all."

"No, I can't do that," I answered. "You know that, Luigi."

"I know you don't love me half as well as I do you," he said, sadly; "and yet I love you better, darling, every time you withstand my prayers."

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## CHAPTER XXXVII

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### AN INVITATION

"SOMETHING for you," announced Miss De la Motte, in a very arch tone, when I came down to breakfast a few days after my arrival in Florence. "Something very valuable."

"What is it?" I asked. "Oh, a letter. Is that all?"

A cloud went across Prince Ferrari's face as she spoke thus of the letter, but it cleared off on my showing no eagerness to open it. Galatea looked at me in surprise.

"Are you not going to read it?" she asked.

"Not just yet," I said, quietly.

"What an odd girl you are!" she exclaimed. "I never could eat my breakfast with a letter still unread, more particularly a—a——"

"A love-letter," suggested Prince Ferrari.

"Yes, a love-letter," she said, sweetly.

I did not understand Winifred De la Motte. At first she used to give me the idea that she had not a word to say for herself, and certainly Mrs. Sandys had quite that impression regarding her. At this time she seemed to be capable of chattering to any extent; I suppose the truth was she never troubled to talk unless there was something very well worth having to be gained by it. Just then, of course, there was something worth a little extra trouble; that something was the handsomest man in Florence and the chance of becoming a princess. In my opinion, she

was a little too eager ; she let her host see her wishes too plainly. They say men like shy game, and Galatea was not shy. She harped upon the subject of my unfortunate letter until at last I believe Luigi would very much have liked to throw something at her. I am quite sure I should. That, however, not being practicable, I having finished my breakfast, broke the seal of the letter and read it. It was not very long, and the impression I received from it was that Rufus certainly did not shine in the art of letter-writing. In tone it was constrained and formal, altogether very much in the same style as that in which he used occasionally to write to his mother. He informed me that Lady de Vonne and her daughter returned to the Castle some days earlier than Maurice expected them ; that Lady Ethel was very much like Maurice in appearance, but brighter. Poor Maurice ! Also, Rufus informed me that he was just going out with Lady Ethel, and that affairs looked what he called 'very shy' at the Cape. Altogether, his whole letter struck me with a sense of disappointment.

"What is the matter?" said Luigi, in a low voice and in his mother-tongue. "Bad news?"

"No," I answered, impatiently, "it is nothing. I will show you afterwards."

I did not know why I need have been so vexed about it. I am sure I did not want Rufus to be effusive, but still, at the same time, he need not have been so stiff and formal.

Until his leave was over Rufus remained at the Castle, and his letters did not grow any more satisfactory ; neither, for the matter of that, did my feelings towards him. Nearly five months of my freedom had gone, and I was no nearer to loving him than I was on the day I promised

to marry him; I doubt, indeed, if I was as near. Evidently the absence which was to bring about this tenderness of heart had failed in its effect. There seemed no likelihood of my love for Luigi being thrust aside as the romantic but unstable affection of a child. On the contrary, with each day it grew stronger and stronger, warmer and more passionate. I dared not trust myself to think how, when this year of delirious happiness had come to an end, I should be able to go back and settle down as the mistress of Hutton Royal and as Rufus Sandys's wife. So the days went by until March was nearly over, and a letter went home to Rufus, asking him to come, if he could get leave.

And then a great load was lifted off my mind, for several days later Prince Ferrari came in saying, "I've just had a letter from Sandys. He is not coming."

"Not coming!" I repeated, incredulously. "Why not?"

"Cannot get his leave. But here is your letter," handing it to me. It was only a thin epistle, and had been written evidently in great haste. It ran as follows:

"MY DEAREST NELL,—I am horribly disappointed that I cannot get foreign leave, but just now it's utterly impossible. I dare say they'll be sending us out to South Africa directly, and so are afraid to let us out of sight, for fear we should escape getting shot. I've tried every dodge I could think of to get it, but all to no good. I bothered the Colonel and bored the Major; I've simply worried the General out of his short allowance of senses, and still I have not succeeded in getting foreign leave. I am afraid, darling, you'll be very much disappointed, but you must console yourself with the fact that I am destined for glory and Boer bullets. How is Ferrari and every one in Florence? Has Galatea succeeded in catching him yet? What fun it must be for you, watching all the by-play and the manœuvres!

"I must be closing this now. The post-corporal is waiting for me to finish, and I am just off to the Castle with three days' leave. Write to me soon.

"Your ever aff.,

"RUFUS."

"He does not seem to mind much," I said, rather dejectedly, as I replaced the letter in the envelope.

"Sensible fellow," remarked Luigi, calmly. "Suppose we follow his example and display our fortitude."

Two or three days later—in Easter week, indeed, it was—there arrived for me an English letter, addressed in writing that was strange to me. I opened it and turned to the signature; it was Lucy de Vonne.

"Who in the world is Lucy de Vonne?" I asked of Luigi.

"Maurice's mother, of course," he replied.

"Really!" Then I read the letter. It said:

"MY DEAR MISS FERRERS,—Your fiancé, Mr. Rufus Sandys, is so very much disappointed at not obtaining his foreign leave, that, though I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting you, I am writing to ask you if you and your guardian, my old friend Prince Ferrari, will pay us a visit here. We shall be charmed to see you, and Mr. Sandys has ten days' leave from Monday next; so that will, I am sure, be an additional inducement to you to come. Will you give my very kind love to the Princess, and tell her that I have not asked her to come, on account of the cold winds we are having just now. I remember her delicate chest. Perhaps one of you will let me know when we may expect you. With very kind regards from Ethel and myself,

"Most sincerely yours,

"LUCY DE VONNE."

"It will be charming!" said the Princess, when she, too, had read it. "How soon will you start?"

"Oh, not before the end of the week," answered her son.

"It is really very kind of Lady de Vonne," she continued. "I am sure it is most thoughtful."

"Got tired of seeing young Sandys's long face, I dare say," laughed Luigi, carelessly.

But Princess Ferrari was one of those kind-hearted women who never put a wrong construction upon anything; therefore, she would not allow for one moment that the invitation from Lady de Vonne is the consequence of anything but the most purely disinterested goodness of heart; and she left the room a few moments later, still murmuring sweet praises of the Marchioness de Vonne.

I had already risen from the table and gone to the window, whither my guardian followed me.

"Well, my little friend," he said.

"Well?" I replied.

"You see you cannot get out of it."

"I don't know," I replied, "that I particularly want to get out of it. I feel as if some way will be opened out. Anyhow, it is fate that we should go back to England."

"And if—if Sandys wants you, Nelly,—wants you to be married before he goes out to active service,—you will tell him the truth."

"I will see."

"You won't promise me?"

"No."

"But you must have my consent, remember," warningly.

"I will remember and forget nothing," I said. "I have an idea that a way will be found."

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## CHAPTER XXXVIII

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### AT THE CASTLE

"NELL," said Prince Ferrari, as we drew near to port, "we are very near now."

He was leaning with his folded arms resting upon the side of the boat, while I was huddled up in my warm furs on a bench.

"There's Maurice," he said, suddenly; "Sandys, too."

"Can you see them?"

"Yes, child. Come, cheer up. You'll be on dry ground directly."

I was on dry ground, certainly, in a comparatively short time; but the cheering up was a more lengthy process.

"Oh, Rufus," I gasped, as I tottered across the gangway into his arms, "I'm almost dead!"

"We began to think you were never coming," he answered.

"Have you been waiting long?" I asked.

"All night. I was really afraid I should have to go and leave Maurice to receive you. I have a court-martial at twelve o'clock. However, since you've come, I can go up as far as Colchester by your train."

"Are you not going back to the Castle with us?" I cried.

"No, dear. My leave begins on Monday, so of course I shall come to-morrow afternoon."

"Oh!" I said.

He did not worry me much with conversation, for which I was duly grateful. I could not take pleasure in the remarks of a king just then. When I was settled in the railway-carriage he put a fur rug round me and placed a foot-warmer comfortably beneath my feet, and then he relapsed into silence. Suddenly, however, tired as I was, I noticed that he was very much altered.

"Rufus, have you been ill?" I asked.

"Ill!" he repeated, with a start. "No. Why?"

"You don't look like yourself," I said.

"Oh, I've been up all night," he declared, with a laugh—such a queer little laugh.

I sank back again, a little puzzled, but too tired to pursue the subject further.

"Up all night, and I am neither washed nor shaved," he continued. "That is enough to make any fellow look bad."

"I never thought of that," I returned. "I dare say I don't look particularly well myself; I know I don't feel so."

I felt a great sense of relief when Lord Maurice and Luigi came to join us, and then the train started. I was rather glad that Rufus was not going back with us to the Castle, for I knew I should be able to recover myself a little before the next afternoon; and, really, he looked so very ill that I was afraid the past four months had been very unhappy ones for him. And yet he had never once hinted at his unhappiness, for fear, I suppose, of worrying me. Dear Rufus, just the same thoughtful darling he always was! I looked at him, wondering why I could not love him best of all. He had taken his hat off and was resting his head against the cushion and his eyes were closed. Such a handsome face it was, though

almost as pale as on the day his mother died, and much more haggard. Oh, how cruel I had been to him! How much more cruel I had it in my heart to be. Well, I determined that when I had told him all the truth I would not go back from my word if he still cared to hold me to it.

I was still busying my aching brain when we reached Colchester, and Rufus opened his eyes.

"Colchester?" he said, in an inquiring tone.

"Yes," answered Lord Maurice; "then you will turn up to-morrow afternoon?"

"Without fail," he returned. "Good-bye till then, Nell."

"Good-bye, Rufus," I said, lamely.

"You know you might drive over to meet me," he suggested.

"Yes, if I can," I answered.

Then he just touched my cheek for a moment with his, and jumped out of the carriage. Lord Maurice handed out his rug, the door was banged to by an impatient guard, and we were off again.

"I say, Miss Ferrars," said Lord Maurice, "have you noticed anything about Rufus?"

"He looks ill," I answered.

"I believe there has been something wrong with him ever since you left. He has certainly never been like himself."

"Has he been much at the Castle?"

"Yes, a good deal. He does not get on with them as well as I expected, though."

"With whom?"

"Well, with my sisters. My mother likes him, and so she asks him a good deal, and of course I am always

glad to see him; but Ethel and Grace don't seem to care much for him or he for them."

After that we relapsed into silence until aroused once more by his pleasant voice.

"Here we are," he said, cheerfully, as the train glided up to the platform; "now, Miss Ferrers, leave those things to me and let Ferrari take you to the carriage."

It was not a very long drive, only half an hour or so, and, when we drove up to the Castle, Lady de Vonne herself came out to greet us.

"My dear child, I am so glad to see you," she cried. "Was not Rufus half wild with delight?"

"Oh, no, he took it very quietly," I answered, with a laugh, when I had released myself from her embrace. "But then he had been up all night and was altogether out of sorts."

"Poor boy! Ah, I dare say, when he comes to-morrow you will find a difference. I assure you he has been in a most doleful state without you."

She led the way into the house, talking all the time.

"Ethel is out—the rector persuaded her to go down to the schools this morning; and Grace, as Maurice has probably told you, is away."

"Yes," I answered, "yes, he told me."

I went to my room at once and made my toilette for lunch. I went down when I heard the gong, and a manservant just crossing the hall showed me to the dining-room, where Lady de Vonne was waiting.

"Come here, dear," she said, kindly, drawing me towards the fire; "I am sure you must be both cold and hungry."

We did not wait, and while we were eating our soup she asked me what I thought of Maurice.

"I think he looks better," I answered, decidedly.

"I am glad of that. I have been very anxious and unhappy about him lately." Then she went on to speak of Mrs. Sandys's death, adding, "And Rufus was so devoted to her; every one at Hutton and for miles around has spoken of it."

"Yes, he was good," I said, softly; "so good that sometimes I could hardly believe it was in any man to do so much as he did. I only wonder he did not take the fever himself."

"It was surprising. Well, you ought to think a great deal more of him for it. Depend upon it, good sons make good husbands."

"I am sure he will make a good husband," I said, in a low voice. And then the door opened and a golden-haired girl came into the room.

"They have come at last, Ethel," said Lady de Vonne, cheerfully.

Lady Ethel came round to my side of the table, and we shook hands. Her hands were very cold, but her manner was full of charm.

"I am afraid you had a very rough crossing?" she remarked in a very refined, musical voice.

"Yes, we had a bad crossing," I answered.

"Miss Ferrers thinks Maurice is looking better, Ethel," began her mother. "Oh, here they are."

Lord de Vonne came in with Lord Maurice and Luigi, and I was then able to steal a glance at the strangers. I saw that Maurice and his sister were very much alike, both of them reproductions of their mother. Lord de Vonne himself was a little dark man, with somewhat of a wandering eye, and he grunted almost between every word. Assuredly, they did not inherit their beauty from

him. I really could not see that Lady Ethel was any more bright than Maurice, but Luigi certainly said she was. Her brown eyes were wistful as those of a collie, and her lips never once relaxed in a smile. I hardly wondered that she did not attract Rufus much, for her face was a grave and almost a sad one.

Luigi sat next to her and talked a good deal; he never once, by the way, so much as glanced in my direction; but, as Lady de Vonne's voice was never quiet for a moment, I could not hear a word they were saying.

I happened to be the one that evening of all the house-party first to reach the drawing-room.

The hands of the Dresden clock upon the chimney-shelf pointed hard on the hour of eight when I went softly into the deserted room. I was standing before the great roaring fire, warming my hands, when Lord de Vonne came in.

"So you are down already, h'm—h'm," he observed.

I felt strongly tempted to reply, "Yes, h'm—h'm," but my discretion overcame my inclination, and I simply answered in the affirmative.

"You ought to have gone over the farm with us," he said, edging up to the fire and steadfastly regarding me with one eye; the other was roaming about the frescoes on the ceiling. "H'm—h'm—your guardian was delighted with my short-horns; more especially the Duchess of York, h'm—h'm."

"Dear me!" I said, innocently. "Have you got a Duchess of York, too? Mr. De la Motte has one."

"I bought her of De la Motte, h'm—h'm," he told me. "Now—er—er—what do you think I gave for her, eh?"

"I'm sure I don't know," I replied, racking my poor brains to try to remember if I have ever heard anything

relative to the price of cattle, short-horned or otherwise, but failing entirely.

"Now, what do you think?" he urged, turning his head on one side, and so favouring me with a stare from the eye which had hitherto been contemplating the frescoes.

"Perhaps fifty pounds," I suggested.

My remark brought forth such a series of "er, ers" and "ugh, ughs," that I perceived I had fallen very wide of the mark.

"Fifty pounds, tut, tut!" he exclaimed. "My dear young lady, do you know—er—er—anything whatever of the relative value of short-horns?"

"Well, no, I do not," I replied, frankly. "But to me fifty pounds seems a good deal to give for a cow."

"A cow!" he repeated, quite forgetting to ugh—ugh. "Goodness gracious, a cow!"

"Well, they are cows, are they not?" I cried, laughing outright.

"The Duchess of York is a short-horn," he returned, with dignity.

"Oh, I see," I said, feeling that it would be but simply to agree with all he said for the future, respecting live-stock, at least. "Then, what did you give for her, Lord de Vonne?"

"Two thousand guineas, ugh—ugh!" he replied. "Now, what do you think of that, eh?"

What I honestly thought of that was that he ought to have been ashamed of himself; but as I could hardly tell him so, in his own house, too, I replied meekly that it seemed a great deal of money.

There was a moment's silence, and then some fiend of impulsiveness sent it out of my mouth.

"Are short-horns any better than other cattle?" I asked.

"To be sure they are, er—er," he replied.

"Well, but do they give better milk," I continued.

"Well,—er—no, I don't know that they do."

"Or better butter?"

"Er—er—perhaps not."

"Are they very superior to eat?" I asked, pressing the subject still further.

"No, ugh—ugh, I don't think they are," regarding me uneasily.

"Then what is the good of them?" I demanded, thinking that at last I had got him and his short-horns fairly into a corner. But he came out of the dilemma splendidly.

"My dear young lady, they are short-horns," he said, majestically.

I was immensely relieved when my lively hostess came in.

"Has my husband been enlightening you about his short-horns?" she asked, with a laugh. "I should say myself you know very little about them."

"The most ignorant young lady I ever met with," Lord de Vonne put in; "utterly uninformed, er—ugh."

"Well, you see, the poor child has had no opportunity of learning any better," she said, pleasantly.

Then Lady Ethel came in, followed very soon by her brother; Luigi appeared last of all. At dinner I was as far away from him as we could very well sit, considering the smallness of the table.

After dinner Lord Maurice carried me off to the piano.

"Sing something."

"What shall it be?"

"'Douglas,'" he answered.

His mother and Lady Ethel seconded his request, so I began the old ballad, though it was the last one I should have chosen, without further ado. I could see by the mirror on the wall before me that Luigi's face was softening wonderfully, and by the time I got to the last verse, all hardness had left it.

"Stretch out your hand to me,  
Douglas ! Douglas !  
Drop forgiveness from heaven, like dew,  
As I lay my heart on your dead heart, Douglas,  
Douglas ! Douglas !  
Tender and true."

Ah, but though the words haunted me during the rest of the evening, it was not of Prince Ferrari, but of Rufus Sandys, that I was thinking. Rufus, so tender, so true, of whom I had never been half worthy.

Luigi came across the room to the piano and asked me very softly to sing something else.

"Not to-night; I am tired," I told him.

Lady de Vonne broke in just then.

"I am sure you must be tired," she said, kindly. "And the sooner you are safely tucked up in your little bed the better, or Rufus Sandys will have something to say to us to-morrow."

Every one laughed, but in my heart rang an echo of despair—to-morrow, to-morrow, to-morrow, as if it were to be the end of all things.

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## CHAPTER XXXIX

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### EXPEDITION

"Now, how are you after your night's rest?" said Lady de Vonne, kindly, when I appeared at the breakfast the following morning. "I hope you slept well, for your fiancé's sake. Ah, yes, you do look better."

I evaded her question with a laugh.

"Do you feel sufficiently recovered to go to church with us?" my hostess went on.

"Oh, yes," I replied.

"That is right. After this morning I shall not have to trouble myself at all about you," she said, smiling. "When Laura was engaged to Marchmont, we put the morning-room and a basket-carriage at their absolute disposal, and then we simply washed our hands of them."

I felt myself turn absolutely scarlet, for I knew that Luigi was looking at me. Lady de Vonne laughed more than ever.

"There, then, we will spare your blushes. Pray save them until he comes."

Of course at this I blushed more furiously than before, but, mercifully, she next addressed herself to Luigi.

"Will you also go to church this morning, Prince?"

"I think not; not this morning," he returned, politely.

I did not see Luigi again until we were all gathered together at lunch. How I did wish that I had pleaded some lingering weariness as an excuse for remaining at

home, for this was the last chance we should have of an hour together.

"By the way, who is going to meet Mr. Sandys?" asked Lady de Vonne, during the course of the meal.

"Miss Ferrers had very strict orders to go," answered Lord Maurice.

"Then she must go, of course," she cried, decidedly. "I won't offer to accompany you, my dear, for I never stir out on Sunday afternoons except to church."

"Ahem," put in Maurice, significantly.

"Now, be quiet, Maurice," she cried. "Sometimes, Miss Ferrers, you must know I do not even do that; Sunday afternoon has its peculiar privileges. Therefore, I do not offer you my company. Do you care to go, Prince?"

"No, thank you," he replied, with a laugh; "I do not care particularly about the rôle of gooseberry."

Lady Ethel coloured up to the very roots of her golden hair, and I wondered if he had arranged to spend the afternoon with her.

"I am afraid, my dear, you must go alone," remarked Lady de Vonne, with a great affectation of condolence.

"I may as well go alone," I said, quietly. "I cannot say I particularly want any one else."

"There is courage for you," she cried, with a merry look at the others. "Never say that English courage is dead. There it is, personified."

"I think you are all making a great fuss about nothing," I said, when the general laugh had subsided. "When you see, that is, how very quietly Rufus and I take things, you will treat us in a very matter-of-fact way."

"Very sensible," grunted the Marquis. "Never could

see myself—ugh, ugh—why—er because two people—er—are going to be married—ugh, ugh—that they need make absolute idiots of themselves.”

“Well, Laura and Marchmont certainly were a trial,” said his wife. “Sometimes we used to think of sending their meals into the morning-room; but they never got quite so far as that.”

“I should think they fight like cat and dog now,” laughed Maurice; “do they, Ethel?”

“I never saw them,” she answered, seriously.

As I expected, Luigi and Lady Ethel disappeared as soon as luncheon was over; and presently Lord Maurice and I, watching from the drawing-room window, saw them walking briskly along the path leading through the shrubberies to the park.

“They might have asked us to go with them,” he said, with a laugh. “Ferrari and Ethel were always great chums.”

“Were they?” I returned, coldly. I wondered if she was sly. I never did believe in those quiet, white pussycats of women.

Lord Maurice and I dawdled about until it was time for me to start. He was very kind, and saw me safely into the smart T-cart which was to take me to the station. It was drawn by a big roan horse, who looked as though he could fly like the wind, and I found, when we had got through the gates and were out upon the road, that he could tear along in fine style.

Our way lay through the park, and just as I emerged on to the high road I caught sight of Luigi and Lady Ethel. Her arm was resting upon the top rail of a stile, and Luigi was leaning against it, talking very earnestly. I wondered what they were talking about. I never had

the least atom of jealousy in my composition, but I would have given anything to know the subject of their discourse. However, I whirled past them with merely a nod, for the big roan declined to be pulled up.

The train had not arrived when we reached the station, so I got out and went on to the platform. There was not a soul within sight, excepting a particularly antique porter, who favoured me with a prolonged stare and informed me that *she* was due. I was glad of it. I dislike waiting for a train, so I was glad when *she* appeared in the distance, and, a minute or two later, drew up beside the platform. Rufus jumped out without delay.

"Well, darling," he exclaimed. Then looked past me eagerly. "Any one come with you?"

"Only a servant," I answered. "Why, do you want any one else?"

"I? Oh, no. Whom should I want but yourself? Here, porter, just take my portmanteau to the carriage, will you? Oh, the T-cart is it? Did you drive here, Nell!"

"Yes."

"He is a regular 'Fly-by-night,' isn't he? His father was 'Fly-by-night,' and his mother was 'Go-by-day,' so he ought to be a good one for speed, ought he not?"

"Come, you are joking," I laughed.

"Fact, really. Isn't it, Swales?"

"Yes, sir," replied the groom; but from his manner, I very much doubted it.

"I never thought of asking his name," I said as we watched the portmanteau and hat-box being stowed away.

"Expedition," answered Rufus. "Will you drive me back, dear?"

"No, thank you; he has made my arms ache." And so



"Yes, dear," he answered, quietly; "but I have been and I am most impatient."

"Oh, you never had much patience," I laughed.

"I am less patient than ever," he said, gravely. "So little left now that I want you to promise me that you will not go back to Italy at all—without me?"

"Without you?" I repeated.

"Yes, darling. I want to be married at once. I can get leave for England at any time; and you will not mind our honeymoon being rather short. We can have the end of it as well at Colchester as anywhere else. Will you, Nell?"

"I don't know," I answered. "I don't know what Prince Ferrarl will say. We must have his consent."

"I know it, dear. I have no doubt he will give it, if you give yours; of course, it can make no difference to him."

"No," I replied, faintly.

"Then I may speak to him," he urged. "I may speak to him?" repeated Rufus.

"Yes, if you like," I replied. "If it will please you."

"If I like—if it pleases me?" he echoed, impatiently. "Of course I like, and of course it will please me. I have no other object in life than to make you happy. Do you think I shall succeed, dear?"

My heart sank as I looked into his wistful face, and I knew that if I spoke the truth I should say no. But I had neither courage nor cruelty enough to say that. I told him a lie, for I said yes.

Rufus heaved a long sigh of relief and his hand closed more tightly over mine.

"It shall not be my fault," he said, gravely. "If you are not perfectly happy." And then he bent down from his high seat and kissed me.

"And so you thought I was ill, little anxious, did you?" he said presently. "Well, childie, you couldn't expect me to look very well when you were away."

"Was it for me?" I asked, wonderingly; and yet in my heart feeling guilty and ashamed.

"For you?"—with a start. "For whom should it be? How suspicious you have grown, Nell!"

"Suspicious," I cried, "I, suspicious. Why, Rufus, of what should I be suspicious? Have you not loved me since the first day you ever saw me?"

"Of course I have. What a fool I am, Nell! If you must know the truth,—and of course we must have no secrets from each other now, must we?"

"No."

"Well, I haven't been sleeping lately; and somehow I've got so irritable and cranky that I hardly know myself. What a brute I am to carp at you, though. Forgive me, darling."

I felt that I had never seen any one so altered in my whole life as Rufus was. It was deplorable. Well, whatever it might cost me, I felt I must keep my word to him. I had no choice but to do my duty, and my duty was to marry him and make the best of it. But, oh, I wished he did not care for me quite so much.

"You haven't asked after Bob," he said presently.

"No, I never gave him a thought. I suppose he is as majestic as ever. Did he miss me much?"

"Dreadfully; almost as badly as I did," he answered.

Poor, dear Rufus, and I had never missed him,—had hardly given him a thought at all, except it was one of fretful impatience at the tie which bound me to him. Well, I would try to make up to him for it—when we were married.

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## CHAPTER XL

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### BY A MERE ACCIDENT

"NELL, my dear," said Lady de Vonne to me after dinner that evening, "I wish you would tell Ethel I want her. She is in the conservatory, I think."

"Certainly."

I went into the conservatory in search of Lady Ethel, but she was not there. I had seen her pass out that way with Rufus, so I went on, thinking that perhaps they were in the boudoir, which opens out from the end farthest from the drawing-room, and, just as I was about to enter, I heard the sound of passionate weeping, and stopped. I stood quite still, as though I had been turned to stone.

"My darling, my darling," I heard Rufus say in soothing tones.

"It is so hard," came Lady Ethel's voice, broken with bitter sobs, "so very hard. She cannot love you as I do, Rufus; it is impossible."

"We must think of honour before love," said Rufus in a choking voice.

"Indeed, you will do nothing of the kind," I cried, finding my feet and my voice at the same time.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, springing away from the weeping girl beside him. "We never meant you to know of this, Nell."

"Oh, forgive me!" cried Lady Ethel, passionately. "Forgive me—forgive me—if you can."

"Do you know what you have done?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, yes! And I wish I were dead,—away from all this misery, to make no more mischief, come between——"

Poor girl! The idea was so absurd that I could not help laughing outright. I glanced at Rufus, who had turned away in dire confusion, and went across the room to him, and put out my hand and took his. Then I led him to her and put his hand in hers.

"There," I cried, laughing still, "there, I'll make you a present of him."

She looked at me doubtfully.

"And you will hate me all your life, as the woman who stole your lover from you," she said, with bitter self-reproach.

"On the contrary," I replied; "I shall think of you all my life as the girl who gave me what I wanted most,—my freedom."

"Your freedom!" she repeated.

During this time Rufus never said a word. I fancy he understood everything in a single flash of comprehension.

"I dare say you will think me a fool," I went on; "perhaps I shall think so myself ten years hence; but I am not, and never have been, in love with Rufus. Mind, I am very fond of him, but I've been very, very unhappy at the prospect of marrying him; and, in making him care for you, you have done me the very greatest service imaginable, because you have released me. Of course, so long as I thought he cared for me, I should have felt bound to keep my promise."

"Are you sure this is true?" she asked. Poor girl! she could hardly believe the good news.

I laughed out loud in my joyous freedom.

"I can hardly believe it myself," I cried. "Why don't you say something, Rufus?"

"Nell, is it——" he began.

"No, no, no!" I cried. "Never mind who or why or how. It is not Rufus Sandys, therefore be satisfied. I shall not give you back your ring, Rufus; but I'll give Lady Ethel another for it, and I will wear yours always, in token of my love for you both. I should like to keep Bob, too, he is so fond of me; and, Lady Ethel, Rufus gave him to me long before we were engaged."

"Not *Lady Ethel*?" she said, gently. "I should like to kiss you, Nell, if you will let me. Oh, you have made me so happy!"

"Why don't you say us?" I asked; and then I freed myself from her and turned to Rufus. "Dear, dear Rufus," I cried, "I will love you both so much all my life. Oh, I do hope you will be happy, very, very happy! Why don't you thank Heaven the explanation did not come too late?"

"I do," he said, solemnly.

"Then what about the money?" I said presently.

"I don't want the money," interrupted Ethel, eagerly.

"Well, I won't have it," I said, quietly; "but I am afraid I cannot give it back to you until I am of age. If you will trust me with it until then, I will——"

"Trust you? Of course I will trust you," cried Rufus, quite hotly.

"That is all right," I replied. "Well, now I am going to tell Lady de Vonne of the little change in our plans. If I tell her, she will soon spread it abroad like the little leaven which leaveneth the whole lump."

They laughed at this; and, having given them both a vigorous hug, I danced—literally jigged—back along the

conservatory into the drawing-room, where I found Lady de Vonne still alone.

"Is that you, dear?" she asked, as I entered.

I danced right up to her. She looked rather surprised, but was indulgent.

"Lady de Vonne," I began, kneeling down at her feet, "you said this afternoon you would like a daughter-in-law. If you like, you can be accommodated with a son-in-law at once."

"What do you mean?" she cried.

"I mean that Rufus and I have found out a wonderful thing to-day. We thought we loved each other, and all the time we were making a mistake; and Rufus now tells me that he and Ethel were breaking their poor hearts. And, oh, Lady de Vonne, I am so happy! I am so happy!"

And then I hid my face upon her lap and wept for very joy.

They say that joy never kills; perhaps it is true, but I know from experience that it sometimes very nearly makes people crazy. I was almost crazy myself; I believe Ethel's mother thought me quite so; and little wonder, for I danced about the room, laughing and crying at the same time, in which plight Lord Maurice came in and found me.

"What now?" he said, stopping short.

"He has turned me off," I cried, dancing up to him. I could not walk, my feet were incapable of sedate movement.

"Rufus?" he said, incredulously.

"Yes; it has all been a mistake, and it is Ethel he cares for. So he is going to marry Ethel, and I am free. Oh, dear, can't you understand it? I have got my freedom."

"But, child, don't you care?" he asked.

"Care! Don't I tell you that I have got my freedom," I answered. "Just think of it. How each of us has been making a sacrifice for the other. I thought poor, dear Rufus was frantically in love with me; and so I suppose he was,—until he met Ethel again. And Rufus thought I cared for him; and so we went on, all three of us perfectly miserable, until by accident I overheard enough to set it all to rights."

"What will Ferrari say?" he said, blankly.

Lady de Vonne had gone in the direction of the boudoir long since.

"I don't know," I answered, suddenly subsiding. "I dare say he will be vexed that he will not be rid of me quite so soon as he expected."

"I must go up to town to-morrow and tell him," he said; "unless Rufus cares to go himself, that is. My dear child, I can hardly believe it all. Are you sure you are not teasing me?"

"I am going to give Rufus his money and estate back as soon as I am of age," I explained, without noticing his question. "And, oh, Lord Maurice, I never was so utterly, thoroughly happy in my whole life as I am to-night!"

"I wonder," said he, "what *she* would say to all this."

"I think she would be glad," I answered. "Just at the last, you know, she was sorry about it; she tried to tell Rufus that she did it for the best. I think, Maurice, she found out then how much she had undervalued him,—for, oh, he was very good to her!"

"Yes, he was very good,—he is her own son," he answered.

"Not one man out of a hundred would have taken that

will as he did," I cried, triumphantly; "for it was unjust,—there is no doubt about it; she thought so herself when it was too late to repair the mischief. And yet he never owned it was anything but right, and, even after he knew that he loved Ethel the best, he never complained. Oh, she is a fortunate girl, that sister of yours!"

"Then how is it, if you think so much of him, that you can let him go so easily?" he asked, in great astonishment. "Unless,—why, Nell, is there some one else?"

"I never said so," I cried, though my face was burning.

"Well, I don't know what Ferrari will say to it," he remarked, mercifully leaving the subject of my probable attachments without further comment.

And so it was all settled. They, the lovers, came to us after a while, looking a little shamefaced, but very happy; and Lady de Vonne, apparently very well satisfied, ran off to tell her lord all about it.

"I told you it would soon be spread," I remarked, with a laugh, as the door closed behind her.

"I wonder what Ferrari will say," said Rufus, in a rather frightened tone.

I met Lord Maurice's eyes just then, and I knew he had guessed my secret.

"But I wonder what he will say to all this," repeated Rufus. "And who is going to tell him?"

"Lord Maurice is going up to town to-morrow to break it," I laughed.

"Oh, that's all right," with a sigh of relief.

"Why, were you afraid of going yourself?"

"Well, my dear Nell, you see it was only the other day that I went and asked to be married at once and told him we were awfully in love with each other, and—really for-

eigners are so impulsive and dramatic—that he might think it necessary to break my head before I'd got half my story told."

"I don't think he will do that," said Lord Maurice, quietly. "Do you, Nell?"

"I am not at all sure," I returned.

"Well, I am very glad you are going, Maurice," laughed Rufus, "for you will tell him far better than any of us."

"It seems to me that you are making a great fuss about nothing," I put in, superbly. "I think most people do make a great deal more fuss than occasions usually warrant. Now, for my part, I really don't care whether Prince Ferrari is pleased or not; he has nothing to do with it."

"Ah, he won't want to break your head," cried Rufus.

"I should hope not, or yours either," I returned.

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## CHAPTER XLI

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### WHAT IS TO BECOME OF NELL?

"AND what are you going to do with yourself to-day?" asked Lord Maurice, when breakfast was over.

"I don't know, poor child!" cried his mother, in tones of great pity. "I cannot stir out with this dreadful cold, and she need not look to Ethel and Rufus for company. I don't know what she can do, unless she goes over the farm and sees the short-horns."

"Can't go this morning, ugh—ugh," Lord de Vonne grunted. "I—er—er have an appointment with Rawson. Very glad, ah—er to go this afternoon, and then you can see the Duchess of York."

"Yes, I should like to see her," I said, knowing that I should thus be out of the way during the entire afternoon.

"Then you might drive me to the station," suggested Lord Maurice; to which I also gave assent, wondering, comically, how often in my life I have driven people to and fro from the railway terminus.

"You will be sure," I said, as he was leaving, "to remember everything he says."

"Shall I bring him back with me?" he asked.

"That will depend upon whether he will come," I replied.

And so I went back and spent the morning with Lady de Vonne; not an unpleasant morning by any means, for

she was a most amusing companion, and talked scandal in the most good-natured way imaginable. I wrote to Mrs. Doyle, too, telling her of the changes. And so the morning slipped away, and lunch-time came, and after lunch I went off with Lord de Vonne.

"Now, be sure you praise the Duchess," said Lady Ethel, laughing, when I came downstairs, dressed for the expedition, "and ask if her head is not especially beautiful."

"Is it?" I asked.

"My father says so," she answered. "I don't know much about it myself."

So, being primed for the occasion, I went out to the drive, where the Marquis and the carriage were waiting. It was a low phaeton, with a pair of bonnie grey ponies, and Lord de Vonne asked if I should like to drive.

"Maurice tells me, ugh—ugh," he remarked, gallantly, "that—you are a good whip."

"I believe I am. I will drive, if you will let me," I replied.

I really enjoyed the afternoon, in spite of my feverish anxiety for Lord Maurice's return. Lord de Vonne, notwithstanding his awkward eye and his hesitating speech, understanding all animals thoroughly, conversed about them pleasantly and well, and the Duchess of York was certainly a beautiful creature. I can understand now, that to one accustomed to such cattle, Paul Potter's "Bull" must be a little trying in shape.

So, when I had thoroughly examined and admired the Duchess, we passed on to the merry little Berkshire pigs, racing about in their straw-bedded dwelling. I was shown everything, even the dairy; and I drank a large tumbler of thick cream milk with the utmost satisfaction.

"I believe you've really enjoyed it, ugh—ugh," said my lord, when we were once more on the way home.

"Indeed, I have,—immensely," I replied. "I had no idea farming was half so nice."

"Ugh—ugh," he remarked. "I wish—er—er, since you and young Sandys have not—um—um—hit it off as you expected—er—that you'd take—take my son Maurice in hand."

"I am afraid that would not work," I answered, with a laugh.

"I don't know,—ugh—ugh,—I don't know," was his reply.

The little man seemed quite serious, and I could only hope that he would not suggest anything of the kind to Lord Maurice. I forgot all about it, however, when I went into the drawing-room, for the first thing I noticed after I entered was the firelight playing on the red-gold hair of my guardian.

"Here she is!" Lady de Vonne's voice said through the gloom, for the room was unlighted, save by the fire, and her corner was quite dark. "How late you are! We quite thought you had run away. Maurice has brought Prince Ferrari back with him, my dear."

"Well, Nell," said my guardian, holding out his hand to me. "You have been making great changes, I hear?"

"Yes," I said, simply.

I said no more, for I was not capable of it. My heart was beating fast and my hands were trembling violently. Luigi, on the contrary, was cool and composed, and released my hand instantly, continuing his conversation with his hostess as if I were perfectly indifferent to him. What nerve he had!

Then Lord Maurice brought me a cup of tea, for

which I thanked him, though I could not take it, my hand was shaking so. He set it down on the table beside me, and patted my hand kindly.

"Foolish child," he murmured.

I looked up quickly, wondering whether Luigi had heard the words, but he was still talking to Lady de Vonne and apparently had not noticed them.

"And how have you enjoyed your afternoon, dear?" Lady de Vonne asked of me presently.

"Oh, very much," I answered, wishing she would leave me alone. "The Duchess is a beauty."

"So she should be—two thousand guineas. I wonder what any man would say if his wife spent two thousand guineas to no purpose. Eh, Prince?"

He laughed, declaring that he never bought short-horns himself, and therefore was not a judge.

"Neither do I buy short-horns," she cried, indignantly; at which we all laughed heartily.

"Ethel," said Rufus, "when I buy short-horns I shall always give you an equal amount too."

"Very well, I will keep you to that," she returned.

"If I were you, Ethel," put in Prince Ferrari, "I would not allow short-horns at all."

"Oh, yes, if he likes," she said, sweetly; at which we all laughed again, though it would be hard to say why.

Presently they disappeared, after their wont, through the door leading into the conservatory, and then Lord Maurice discovered that he wanted his mother to do something for him in the library, so they too departed, leaving us alone together.

Luigi and I were quite near to each other,—so near that he put out one strong hand and drew me, chair and all, close beside him.

"And so you and Sandys have not hit it off, after all," he said.

\* \* \* \* \*

After dinner, when the servant had served coffee and left the room, Luigi looked at Lady de Vonne.

"As Nell's guardian," he said, "I should like to be the one to drink the health of the happy pair and to wish them every kind sort of luck and happiness. We ought to be thankful, every one of us, that the truth came to light when it did, so that no real harm has been done."

We all drank the toast,—I, for one, with very real fervour,—and then Luigi spoke again.

"We have been talking, Nell and I, about the property. I don't understand the exact legal form in which it can be done, but I believe the best way of restoring it to him will be for Nell to be married on the same day as Sandys and Ethel. Then her husband can give Sandys an undertaking to make over the property by deed of gift as soon as she is twenty-one, and he shall have possession of it."

"Yes, that is all very well," said Lady de Vonne; "but whom is Nell to marry?"

"Oh, Nell is to marry me!" said he, quietly.

THE END



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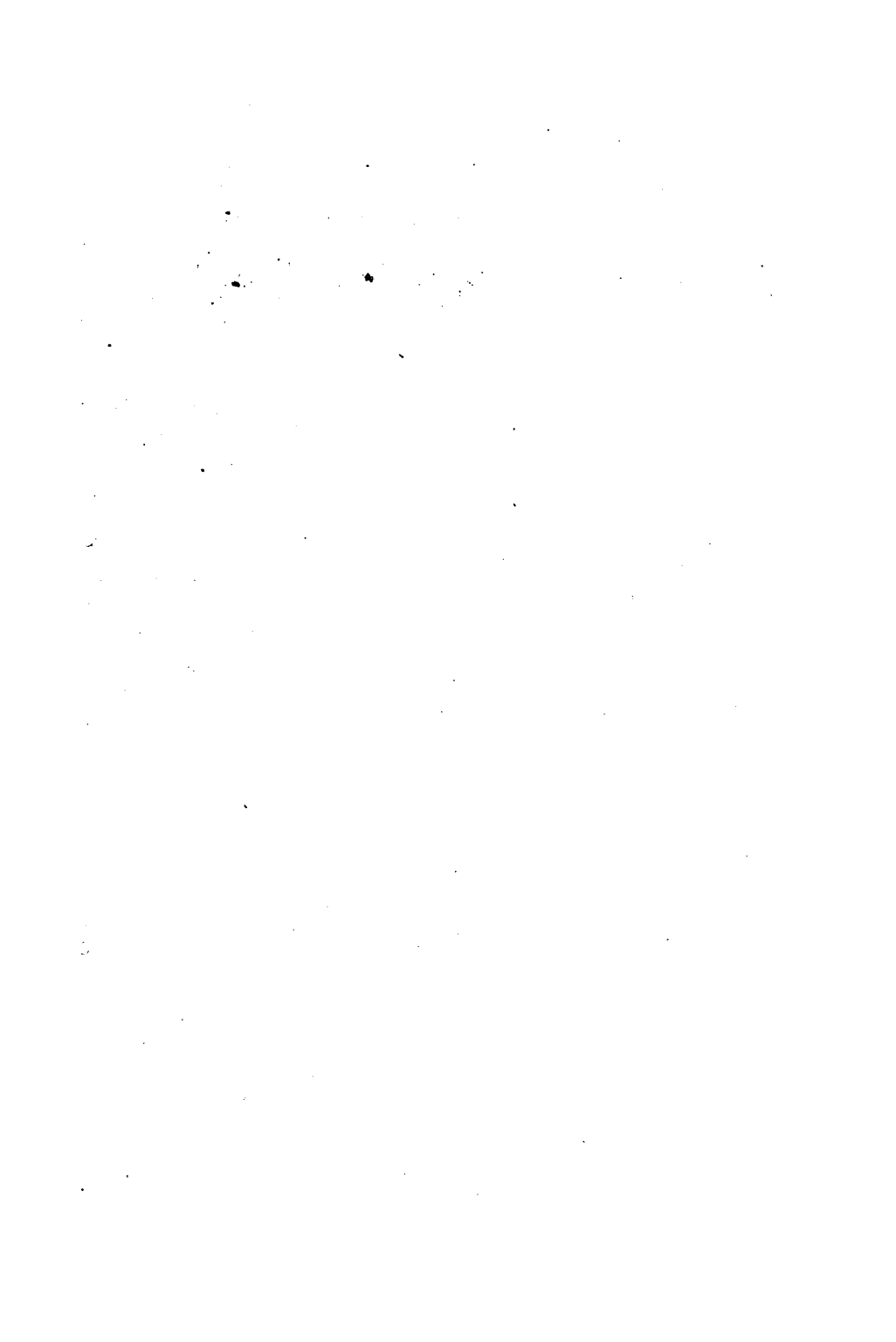
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